



Negotiating Identity in a Marketized ELT Space: Filipino English Teachers in Korean Private Academies

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Abstract

This study investigates how Filipino English teachers (FETs) construct professional identity within South Korea's private academies, or hagwons. While prior research on non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) has focused on formal institutions, this study addresses the underexplored commercial ELT sector. Survey and interview data were collected from 20 FETs. Quantitative results showed that adaptation strategies—such as credentialing, accent negotiation, and instructional flexibility—were the strongest predictor of professional identity. Qualitative thematic analysis revealed five core themes: nonlinear job entry, accent negotiation, self-driven credentialing, relational labor, and instructional autonomy. Despite limited institutional support, participants asserted legitimacy through relational work and pedagogical agency. These findings highlight how FETs negotiate identity in stratified, native-speakerist environments and contribute to broader discussions on NNEST legitimacy, World Englishes, and ELT equity. The study calls for inclusive policies that recognize diverse teacher identities beyond Inner Circle norms.

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INTRODUCTION

In commercial English Language Teaching (ELT) spaces like South Korea's hagwons—where institutional roles are often ambiguous and peer communities fragmented—identity formation takes place through informal practices and individual negotiations. Wenger's (1998) notion of communities of practice is helpful here, but must be adapted: in such contexts, professional legitimacy is not institutionally conferred but informally earned through consistent performance, rapport-building, and strategic navigation of workplace norms. This view aligns with Sachs' (2005) argument that teacher identity is not static, but continually reshaped through agency, resilience, and response to structural constraints.

In South Korea's hyper-competitive and globalized educational landscape, English proficiency is not merely a skill but a symbolic asset—widely perceived as a gateway to social mobility, academic achievement, and international opportunity. Historically, affluent families sought this linguistic capital by sending their children abroad to English-speaking countries (Korea Herald, 2014; 2015). However, shifting economic realities—rising costs of overseas education and the emotional toll of cultural displacement and identity struggles among returnees (Choe & Son, 2018)—have made such routes less viable. In response, the country's ELT industry has evolved, increasingly relying on imported linguistic expertise in the form of foreign English teachers, primarily through public schools and private academies.

This shift has deepened the divide between formal educational institutions and privatized learning spaces. Among the latter, hagwons—for-profit, after-school academies—have emerged as powerful, market-driven entities where educational decisions are shaped more by consumer perceptions than pedagogical substance. In these spaces, the commodification of English is stark: hiring practices often privilege superficial markers of linguistic “authenticity” such as nationality, phenotype, and accent over actual teaching qualifications or experience (Choe, 2016; Choi & Choe, 2021). Such dynamics raise critical questions about who is deemed a legitimate language educator and what kind of English is considered valuable or “correct.” By using hagwon as the primary term throughout this paper, we align with local terminology while also emphasizing the cultural specificity and ideological tensions embedded in South Korea's privatized ELT ecosystem.

Most foreign English teachers employed in hagwons are citizens of countries recognized by Korea's E-2 visa policy—namely the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Ireland. These individuals are typically recruited through standardized channels and presented as “native speakers,” a status that carries both institutional preference and consumer appeal. In contrast, Filipino English teachers (FETs)—many of whom work on marriage-based F-6 visas—occupy a more precarious position within this system. Despite being fluent, credentialed, and experienced, they often navigate opaque employment structures and implicit expectations rooted in native-speakerist ideologies (Cho, 2024; Holliday, 2006). Their pathways into the ELT workforce are typically informal, and their professional legitimacy is often negotiated on a case-by-case basis.

FETs—many of whom work on marriage-based F-6 visas—occupy a precarious position. Although professionally competent and considered on a par with native English teachers across Asia (see Balgoa, 2019; Floris, 2013; Yeh, 2024), they often navigate opaque employment structures and implicit expectations rooted in native-speakerist ideologies (Cho, 2024; Holliday, 2006).

While existing research on non-native English-speaking teachers in Korea has largely focused on those employed in public schools and universities (Park, 2015; Song, 2016), less attention has been given to teachers in commercial ELT settings, where institutional recognition is minimal and professional identity is forged through individual negotiation. Hagwons remain underexamined as critical spaces of identity work, despite the growing presence of Filipino educators sustaining Korea's supplementary education economy.

This study examines how FETs construct and sustain professional identity in hagwons, where informal hiring mechanisms, limited institutional support, and accent-centered evaluation shape their work. Guided by Wenger's (1998) theory of communities of practice and Cong-Lem's (2021) framework of teacher agency, the study explores how these educators navigate precarious labor conditions and linguistic gatekeeping. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to broader discussions on non-native English-speaking teachers (NNEST) legitimacy and FETs' status in Korea's private ELT landscape, the politics of English accents, and the lived realities of migrant teachers in market-driven ELT environments. In addition, this study seeks to recognize the unique contributions of NNEST in general, acknowledging their role and impact in the field. By bringing greater attention to their teaching experiences and credentials, work ethic, and adaptability, it aspires to encourage thoughtful discussion in future educational and immigration policy reforms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher Identity and Informal ELT Spaces

Professional identity is increasingly understood as a context-sensitive construct shaped through everyday teaching experiences and social interactions (Beijaard et al., 2004; Sachs, 2005; Jeon, 2009). It is expected that professional identities of NNESTs follow the prevailing ideas in marketized, private ELT spaces. Although educational in nature, most of these private institutions are shaped by consumer demand, competition, branding, and profitability. In other words, English teaching becomes commodified and commercialized with emphasis on profit generation instead of emphasis on equitable access and local pedagogical needs (Block et al., 2012). In commercial ELT spaces like South Korea's hagwons—where institutional roles are often ambiguous and peer communities fragmented—identity formation takes place through informal practices and individual negotiations. Wenger's (1998) notion of communities of practice is helpful here, but must be adapted: in such contexts, professional legitimacy is not institutionally conferred but informally earned through consistent performance, rapport-building, and strategic navigation of workplace norms. This view aligns with Sachs' (2005) argument that teacher identity is not static, but continually reshaped through agency, resilience, and response to structural constraints.

For FETs, identity construction in such contexts involves constant negotiation. Many enter Korea's ELT sector through F-6 marriage visas, bypassing standardized recruitment systems. This pathway enables employment but often renders their roles informal and their legitimacy precarious (Ministry of Justice, 2024). In these settings, Choi and Choe (2021), noted that credentials may be secondary to customer satisfaction, professional identity is sustained through classroom performance, personal resilience and relational labor or the continuous and intentional efforts educators make to build and maintain meaningful relationships with their students and colleagues (Moskowitz et al., 2022), classroom performance, and personal resilience. As recent scholarship on teacher agency suggests, identity is also shaped by teachers' capacity to act purposefully and strategically within structural constraints (Cong-Lem, 2021). The enactment of teacher agency—mediated by personal beliefs, social positioning, and institutional affordances—plays a crucial role in how educators maintain professional legitimacy in underrecognized or marginal teaching environments such as hagwons.

Native Speakerism, Accent Ideologies, and Strategic Adaptation

Despite efforts to pluralize English language teaching, native-speakerism continues to shape perceptions of legitimacy in ELT globally (Holliday, 2006; Kamhi-Stein, 2018). In South Korea's hagwon system, hiring practices frequently prioritize nationality, appearance, and accent over pedagogical qualifications, reinforcing exclusionary norms (Cho, 2024; Yi, 2011). FETs, although often fluent and experienced, are subjected to scrutiny based on perceived deviation from Inner Circle speech norms. Accent becomes a powerful gatekeeping mechanism, one that reflects broader ideologies of linguistic and racial superiority (Clark & Paran, 2007; Jenkins, 2006).

Faced with these pressures, many NNESTs engage in strategic accommodation (Canagarajah, 1999), modifying their accents or downplaying their national origin to meet employer and client expectations. This linguistic performance is not merely cosmetic—it functions as a survival strategy in an ELT labor market where teachers are judged as much for how they sound as for what they teach. At the same time, many FETs assert professional legitimacy through other means: pursuing TESOL certifications, reflecting critically on their practice, and adapting instruction to local needs (Freeman, 2017).

Reframing Legitimacy through World Englishes and Pedagogical Strength

The World Englishes paradigm provides a theoretical foundation for rethinking teacher legitimacy beyond native-speakerist norms. Kachru's (1986) model situates Philippine English (PhE) within the Outer Circle, recognizing its institutionalization, intelligibility, and pedagogical viability. While PhE is widely used in the Philippines and internationally, it remains undervalued in ELT markets like South Korea, where Inner Circle accents—particularly American—are treated as default standards (Borlongan, 2022).

This mismatch between linguistic ideology and actual communicative competence contributes to the marginalization of Filipino teachers. However, research has shown that FETs bring valuable assets to ELT, including cross-cultural awareness, multilingual empathy, and strong student engagement skills (Mahboob, 2010; Medgyes, 1992). In the absence of institutional recognition, many FETs assert legitimacy through affective labor and student outcomes, gaining informal validation from learners and parents alike (Choe, 2016; Yuan & Burns, 2017). Framing their identity within a World Englishes lens shifts the focus from accent conformity to pedagogical effectiveness and linguistic diversity—thereby affirming FETs as legitimate and essential actors in Korea's ELT landscape.

Research Gaps and Study Objectives

While much research has explored how NNESTs construct professional identity in public schools and universities (Beijaard et al., 2004; Park, 2015; Song, 2016), informal ELT settings such as South Korea's hagwons remain comparatively underexamined. This omission is notable given that hagwons constitute a major segment of Korea's supplementary education sector and frequently employ FETs through informal or relational channels. Existing studies have documented patterns of exclusion and marginalization faced by FETs (Choe, 2016; Yi, 2011), but there remains a lack of in-depth inquiry into how these teachers negotiate legitimacy, adapt professionally, and construct their identities within commercial, low-support environments.

Moreover, although the World Englishes framework has gained traction in ELT scholarship, its practical impact on hiring and instructional practices in Korea's private education sector remains limited. Despite the linguistic legitimacy of PhE, Filipino teachers are still often evaluated against native-speaker norms—particularly accent and nationality—within hagwon contexts where parental satisfaction and institutional branding outweigh pedagogical evaluation.

Methodologically, thematic analysis has proven effective in studies examining teacher identity in similar contexts. For instance, Choe (2016) employed thematic analysis to explore how FETs—working in international schools catering exclusively to Korean students in the Philippines—narrated their professional legitimacy and classroom authority. However, Choe's study did not triangulate thematic findings with quantitative data, which could have provided a deeper understanding of how measurable factors, such as classroom performance or student evaluations, influence teacher identity construction. This gap highlights an opportunity for the current study to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches, thus providing a more comprehensive analysis of the complex identity negotiations FETs experience in commercial ELT environments.

This study addresses these gaps by offering a focused, mixed-methods analysis of FETs working in hagwons across South Korea. Drawing from Wenger's (1998) theory of communities of practice and Cong-Lem's (2021) framework on teacher agency, it examines how FETs construct and sustain professional identity in a marketized labor space marked by accent bias, visa-mediated entry, and minimal institutional support. Through an integrated analysis of survey and interview data, the study investigates the following questions:

- Research Question 1: How do FETs perceive their professional identity and related contextual factors (e.g., discrimination, adaptation strategies, institutional support, and policy perceptions) in South Korean hagwons?
- Research Question 2: How do Filipino English teachers construct and negotiate their professional identities within the socio-institutional context of hagwons?
- Research Question 3: What agentive strategies do FETs employ to assert legitimacy and adapt professionally in response to institutional and sociocultural challenges? How are institutional support, perceived discrimination, and adaptation strategies related to professional identity, based on survey data?

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-method design to explore how FETs working in South Korean hagwons construct professional identity within commercial and informal educational environments. It integrated surveys and semi-structured interviews. Triangulation enhanced validity by capturing patterns in satisfaction and legitimacy, narrative insights on adaptation, and systemic context from hiring and visa policies. Detailed descriptions of participants, instruments, and analytic procedures are provided in the following sections.

Participants

The study involved 20 Filipino English teachers currently employed in hagwons across various cities and provinces in South Korea. All participants held F-6 (marriage migrant) visas, which legally permit employment outside the restrictions of the E-2 visa framework. The group consisted of 18 women and 2 men, aged 37 to 60 years ($M = 43.45$), with teaching experience ranging from 8 to 20 years ($M = 13.85$).

All participants held at least a bachelor's degree, while several had attained master's degrees. Of the 20 participants, 11 had academic backgrounds in English, education, or applied linguistics, while the remaining 9 held degrees in unrelated

fields such as nursing, business administration, and psychology. Common certifications included TESOL, Philippine LET (Licensure Examination for Teacher—a national-level qualifying examination), and other specialized English language teaching credentials. These varied professional profiles reflect the diverse credentialing pathways FETs pursue to gain employment and assert pedagogical legitimacy in Korea’s private ELT sector

Data Collection

Data were collected in two sequential phases: first through a structured survey, followed by semi-structured interviews and a review of institutional documents. The survey—designed to capture perspectives on identity, job satisfaction, and workplace barriers—consisted of 36 items and was informed by prior NNEST scholarship (Choe, 2016; Jung & Choe, 2024), and TESOL policy guidelines. A total of 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted one-on-one via Zoom, each lasting between 45 and 70 minutes. All instruments were reviewed by TESOL experts and pilot-tested with FETs for clarity and relevance. For transparency and replicability, the survey questionnaire, interview protocol, and informed consent form are publicly accessible via the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/egc89/?view_only=a1aa9de57c924a678bfa033f1e13bfd9.

Data Analysis

Statistical Analysis

To explore relationships among core constructs, the study employed descriptive, reliability, and inferential statistics. Item responses across five domains—professional identity, perceived discrimination, adaptation strategies, institutional support, and policy perceptions—were summarized using means and standard deviations. Data reliability was examined using Cronbach’s alpha via the psych package in R (version 4.4.0), with .70 set as the acceptability threshold. All domains exceeded this benchmark.

Group differences were tested using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), with partial eta squared (η^2) reported to assess effect size. Correlational patterns were examined through Pearson’s r , and predictive relationships were assessed using multiple linear regression. All tests were conducted at a significance level of $\alpha = .05$.

Thematic Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis framework. The process entailed data familiarization, dual-mode coding (both inductive and theory-informed), theme generation, and iterative refinement. Examples of key codes include “accent bias,” “credentialing,” and “emotional labor,” which were consolidated into broader themes.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed ethical research protocols. Participants gave informed consent and were briefed on their rights, including voluntary withdrawal. All data were anonymized and securely stored. Institutional documents were accessed ethically. Given the sensitivity of workplace issues, interviews were conducted with care, with sensitive disclosures shared only with explicit approval.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the study’s findings in alignment with the three research questions, organized by data type to reflect the sequential mixed-methods design. Quantitative results from the survey address Research Question 1, which explores FETs’ perceptions of their professional identity and related contextual factors in South Korean hagwons. The subsequent qualitative analysis responds to Research Questions 2 and 3, examining how FETs construct professional identity and the agentive strategies they use to navigate institutional and sociocultural challenges. By presenting the findings in this order, the discussion builds from broad perceptual trends to deeper narrative insights.

Quantitative Findings

This subsection reports on survey data from 20 hagwon-based FETs based on descriptive statistics, reliability analyses, ANOVAs, correlations, and regression models.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed for each of the five domains: professional identity, perceived discrimination, adaptation strategies, institutional support, and policy perceptions. As shown in Table 1, mean identity scores were high across participants, with relatively low standard deviation, indicating generally strong professional self-perception. Strategy use also scored highly, followed by institutional support and policy alignment. Perceived discrimination showed greater variability across respondents.

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics for Domain-Level Survey Responses (N = 20)

Domain	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Professional Identity	4.71	0.31	3.56	5.00
Perceived Discrimination	3.06	1.14	1.14	4.86
Adaptation Strategies	4.45	0.41	3.33	5.00
Institutional Support	3.89	0.65	2.25	5.00
Policy Perceptions	4.42	0.44	3.00	5.00

Reliability Analysis

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for each of the five survey domains: professional identity, perceived discrimination, adaptation strategies, institutional support, and policy perceptions. As shown in Table 2, all domains demonstrated excellent reliability, with alpha values ranging from .86 to 0.98—well above the conventional threshold of 0.70. These results indicate that the item sets used to measure each construct were internally consistent and appropriate for further analysis.

TABLE 2
Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficients by Domain

Domain	Cronbach's Alpha
Professional Identity	0.96
Perceived Discrimination	0.94
Adaptation Strategies	0.86
Institutional Support	0.97
Policy Perceptions	0.98

Note. $\alpha \geq .70$ indicates acceptable reliability.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the five domains. As shown in Table 3, adaptation strategies exhibited a strong positive correlation with professional identity ($r = .64$), followed by moderate correlations with institutional support ($r = .41$) and policy perceptions ($r = .42$). Notably, discrimination was not significantly correlated with professional identity or any other domain.

Table 3
Pearson Correlations among Domains

Variable	Identity	Discrimination	Strategy	Institutional Support	Policy
Identity	–				
Discrimination	0.00	–			
Strategy	0.64	0.10	–		
Institutional Support	0.40	-0.28	0.41	–	
Policy	0.37	0.00	0.42	0.23	–

Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 4 presents that the overall regression model approached statistical significance, $F(4, 15) = 2.998, p = .053$, accounts for approximately 44.4% of the variance in professional identity ($R^2 = .444, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .296$). Although the model did not meet the conventional threshold for statistical significance ($p < .05$), it suggests a potential trend that may warrant further investigation. Perceived discrimination, institutional support, and policy perceptions did not significantly predict identity scores.

Although the statistical result for adaptation strategies (Strategy Use) reached significance within the regression model, the borderline non-significance of the overall model ($p = .053$) calls for caution. This finding may suggest a potential relationship between adaptation strategies and professional identity, but further research with larger samples is necessary to confirm this effect. Theoretically, the relevance of adaptation strategies aligns with the concept of teacher agency and identity negotiation in contexts of professional transition and sociocultural adaptation. These frameworks emphasize the active role teachers play in shaping their professional identity through intentional responses to contextual demands. Thus, the tentative link found here between adaptation strategies and identity formation supports the need for deeper theoretical and empirical inquiry.

TABLE 4
Multiple Regression Predicting Professional Identity

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	0.87	1.37	–	0.64	.533
Discrimination	-0.00	0.19	-0.00	-0.01	.992
Strategy Use	0.54	0.24	0.54	2.26	.039
Institutional Support	0.17	0.24	0.17	0.72	.483
Policy Perception	0.14	0.27	0.14	0.53	.604

Summary of Quantitative Findings

The quantitative results provide a statistically grounded view of how FETs in hagwons perceive and construct their professional identities. Descriptive statistics revealed high identity scores and frequent use of adaptation strategies, underscoring participants’ strong self-perception and active efforts to assert legitimacy in low-support environments. Reliability analyses confirmed excellent internal consistency across all survey domains. Correlation analysis showed that adaptation strategies were strongly associated with professional identity, while institutional support and policy perceptions had moderate positive correlations. Notably, perceived discrimination showed no significant correlation with identity or other domains. Multiple regression analysis further emphasized the central role of adaptation strategies, which emerged as the sole significant predictor of professional identity. These findings suggest that in the absence of formal institutional scaffolding, it is through credentialing, classroom innovation, and strategic negotiation that FETs most effectively assert their legitimacy and build a resilient professional self-concept.

Qualitative Findings

This section draws on data from semi-structured interviews analyzed through Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework to understand how Filipino English teachers construct and perform professional identity in South Korea’s private

English academies. In these spaces—marked by minimal institutional support and market-driven pressures—teachers navigate legitimacy through a combination of personal resilience, cultural negotiation, and pedagogical innovation. Five interwoven themes emerged: (1) Entry Pathways and Job Instability, (2) Accent as Symbolic Currency, (3) Credentialing as Self-Affirmation, (4) *Pakikisama* and Affective Negotiation, and (5) Classroom Autonomy and Pedagogical Agency. These are considered in relation to the survey data, providing a nuanced, triangulated perspective on identity formation in commercial ELT contexts.

Theme 1: Entry Pathways and Job Instability

Many FETs entered ELT in South Korea through unstructured, opportunistic routes—often via marriage migration and informal referrals rather than competitive recruitment. Their hiring was frequently ad hoc and unsupported, echoing findings from Choe (2016) that ELT employment in hagwons is governed more by market access than educational planning.

I never intended to teach when I first came to Korea. My goal was to focus on my Korean husband and family. However, a friend introduced me to the director of a hagwon, and before I knew it, I was teaching. It all happened so fast that I barely had time to comprehend what was going on. Suddenly, I was standing in front of a classroom, something I never imagined I would be doing. (Teacher A)

Teacher A’s narrative captures the nonlinear professional trajectories that characterize many FETs’ experiences. Her story also reflects how precarity begins at entry—employment is mediated through kinship networks rather than institutions. The absence of onboarding and mentoring resonates with Canagarajah’s (1999) argument that periphery teachers often operate in unregulated spaces of labor. The moderate correlation between institutional support and identity ($r = .40$) further suggests that identity is often forged despite, not because of, systemic scaffolding.

Theme 2: Accent as Symbolic Currency

Accent emerged as a highly policed domain, where sounding “native” was often treated as a proxy for professional credibility. Several participants described modifying their accent or suppressing their Filipino identity to align with parental expectations—a practice aligned with native-speakerist hierarchies (Holliday, 2006; Song, 2016).

My boss came up with a story and told the parents I grew up from the U.S. so I could get the job. It felt a bit strange at first, but honestly, it was the only way I could get hired. I didn’t give it much thought because, in the end, it got me the position, even though it wasn’t entirely true. (Teacher F)

When I first began teaching, I could tell some of the students were uncertain around me, probably because of my accent. To make things easier, I worked on adjusting my speech to sound more international, hoping it would help me avoid any more questions or awkward moments. (Teacher H)

These narratives exemplify how FETs internalize market logics that privilege whiteness and American-accented English (Choe, 2016). Although perceived discrimination was not statistically related to professional identity ($r = .00$), the emotional and performative labor involved in accent negotiation was widespread. These practices illustrate Canagarajah’s (1999) notion of “strategic competence” in navigating elite linguistic markets and reinforce the survey finding that adaptation strategies predict identity.

Theme 3: Credentialing as Self-Affirmation

In the absence of institutional recognition, many FETs pursued TESOL certificates and advanced degrees to affirm their own legitimacy. These were rarely required by employers, but functioned as tools of self-empowerment and professional pride.

When it came time to choose a path, I decided to take TESOL, not because it was something that was required of me, but because I wanted to prove something to myself. At the time, I wasn’t entirely sure I was capable of teaching English, but I knew I wanted to give it a try. It wasn’t about meeting any external expectations or following a predetermined

path. It was about pushing myself to see if I could rise to the challenge, to become someone who was confident enough to teach others. (Teacher C)

When I first started, I felt unsure about my qualifications, so earning the TESOL certification was a way to reassure myself that I was capable. It wasn't about impressing anyone else—it was a personal goal I set for myself to feel more confident and competent in my teaching abilities. (Teacher E)

These accounts confirm Sachs' (2005) and Beijaard et al.'s (2004) views that teacher identity is not fixed, but continually negotiated and invested in. Credentialing here is not transactional but symbolic—it is a form of professional resistance against a system that devalues Outer Circle teachers (Kachru, 1986; Borlongan, 2022). The moderate correlation between institutional support and adaptation ($r = .41$) suggests that credentialing is a self-driven strategy used to compensate for the absence of formal validation.

Theme 4: Pakikisama and Affective Negotiation

Rooted in both Filipino indigenous psychology (Enriquez, 1992) and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, pakikisama is a core interpersonal value emphasizing group harmony, accommodation, and relational smoothness. It reflects a collectivist orientation where maintaining good interpersonal relationships takes precedence over individual assertiveness (Saito et al., 2010). To better situate pakikisama within a global communication framework, it aligns with Ting-Toomey's (1999) intercultural communication theories, particularly her work on face negotiation theory and high-context communication. In such contexts, indirectness, emotional restraint, and harmony-preserving behaviors are key to maintaining "face" and relational equity

We were only given two clear instructions: always speak English and never be late. But over time, I realized that there's so much more to teaching and building relationships than just following those rules. I learned that qualities like kindness, patience, and respect have a far greater impact than simply adhering to the rules. It's the way you connect with people, show empathy, and treat them with dignity that truly matters in the long run. (Teacher D)

When interacting with my Korean colleagues, I've learned that choosing my words carefully is crucial. There are times when silence is the wisest choice. It's not just about what you say, but how you say it. Understanding and respecting cultural nuances, like the importance of pakikisama, which values harmony and maintaining good relationships, can go a long way in building trust and cooperation. (Teacher I)

These narratives affirm Yuan and Burns' (2017) findings that relational labor is central to NNEST legitimacy. Pakikisama here is not merely cultural—it is a strategic tool of affective discipline, allowing teachers to maintain employment in the absence of clear policy protections. This corresponds with the moderate correlation between policy perception and adaptation strategies ($r = .42$), where relational tact becomes a substitute for structural clarity. The narratives also support Park's (2015) argument that emotional regulation is essential in underregulated private ELT settings.

Theme 5: Classroom Autonomy and Pedagogical Agency

Despite limited structural support, many FETs asserted their professionalism through curriculum modification, student-centered instruction, and pedagogical innovation. Their classrooms emerged as safe spaces that fostered both teacher and learner autonomy. This finding aligns with Little's (1995, 1996) theory on the interdependence of teacher and learner autonomy. According to Little (1995), promoting learner autonomy is fundamentally linked to the autonomy of teachers in two essential ways: first, teachers must possess a personal understanding of autonomous learning in order to foster it in their students; second, they must be capable of making independent pedagogical decisions, drawing on reflective and self-regulatory practices grounded in their professional expertise. Similarly, Benson (2011) emphasized the value of teacher autonomy in ELT, arguing that when educators are granted the freedom to adapt curricula and experiment with methods, they engage in bottom-up innovation—initiatives that originate organically within the classroom rather than through top-down mandates. These foundational principles in language teaching appear to be reflected in the pedagogical practices of FETs.

I eventually stopped sticking to the lesson plans they gave me and started using activities that I found actually worked for my students. It wasn't easy at first, but once I saw the positive results, I knew I was on the right track. The best part is, now my students are so happy with the lessons that they actively tell their friends to join my class. It's such a rewarding feeling knowing that they enjoy coming to class and that I've found a teaching approach that really resonates with them. (Teacher E)

I decided to adjust the lesson plans to better suit my students' needs. It wasn't about following a script—it was about finding what would truly help them learn. Fortunately, my boss trusted me to make these changes, giving me the freedom to do what I felt would work best. That trust has made a huge difference in how I approach teaching, allowing me to adapt and focus on what's most effective for my students. (Teacher J)

Interview excerpts reveal that FETs tend to be effective in their classrooms largely because they are granted considerable autonomy over classroom management, instructional materials, and pedagogical choices. This freedom enables them to adopt highly personalized teaching approaches that are well-received by their students. Their established professionalism and strong work ethic have earned the trust of colleagues and superiors, leading to greater academic freedom and decision-making power. One notable outcome of this autonomy is the ability of FETs to incorporate highly contextualized and localized examples of the target language, rather than relying solely on the perceived “standard” variety of English. This approach not only enriches the learning experience but also helps students develop a more flexible and inclusive understanding of English as a global language. Little (1996) emphasized the importance of such conditions in fostering classroom autonomy, highlighting the connection between teacher agency and effective, learner-centered instruction. These practices reflect Wenger's (1998) concept of identity-in-practice and Freeman's (2017) argument that teacher legitimacy is enacted through meaningful pedagogical engagement. Although discrimination showed no statistical association with identity, these examples show how teachers negotiate institutional invisibility through student rapport and curriculum autonomy. Such classroom-based validation is a key site of legitimacy for teachers working under native-speakerist regimes.

Summary of Qualitative Findings

The interviews paint a compelling picture of how Filipino English teachers in hagwons assert and shape professional identity through agentic practices in structurally precarious settings. Rather than relying on formal recognition, they build legitimacy by adapting accents, earning credentials, maintaining interpersonal harmony, and innovating in the classroom.

The five emergent themes—nonlinear job entry, accent negotiation, self-driven credentialing, relational labor, and instructional autonomy—converge around a central finding: professional identity is not institutionally granted but actively constructed through adaptation. These qualitative insights affirm the quantitative result that adaptive strategies were the strongest predictor of identity. Together, the findings suggest that resilience, cultural competence, and pedagogical agency are the core resources FETs draw upon to navigate legitimacy in South Korea's privatized ELT sector.

CONCLUSION

This study offers valuable insights into the professional identity construction of FETs working in South Korea's hagwons, highlighting the critical role of adaptation strategies. It finds that FETs establish professional legitimacy through agentic practices such as accent modification, credentialing, and classroom innovation, despite receiving limited institutional support. These findings contribute meaningfully to the growing body of literature on NNESTs and have significant implications for both practice and policy within private English language teaching contexts.

The study sheds light on how migrant NNESTs—specifically FETs—navigate and assert legitimacy in market-driven ELT environments. From a pedagogical perspective, it underscores the need to equip NNESTs not only with instructional skills but also with strategies to manage the affective and sociocultural complexities of language teaching in privatized settings. To support this, institutions should provide teachers with sufficient professional autonomy. Allowing FETs the flexibility to adapt curricula, modify teaching strategies, and design context-sensitive learning experiences empowers them to respond effectively to their students' diverse needs. Such autonomy fosters innovation, enhances teacher agency and professionalism, and ultimately benefits students through more relevant, engaging, and culturally responsive instruction.

Additionally, South Korea's private ELT sector could benefit from embracing a more inclusive and forward-thinking view of English as a global lingua franca. As English evolves beyond native-speaker norms, prioritizing pedagogical

competence over nationality can enhance both the quality and equity of English education. Clinging to rigid native-speaker ideologies may inadvertently hinder the richness and authenticity of the learning experience. Policymakers and educational institutions are thus encouraged to adopt more equitable recruitment and evaluation frameworks that recognize the qualifications and legitimacy of NNESTs, particularly FETs. Such frameworks should reflect the core language learning principles discussed in this study and align with global trends that value diversity in English language teaching.

While this study offers foundational insights into the experiences and professional agency of FETs, it is limited in scope due to its small sample size (20 participants) and reliance on self-reported, cross-sectional data. These factors restrict the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the study's exclusive focus on South Korea limits its applicability to other contexts.

Future research should involve larger, more diverse samples to explore shared and context-specific challenges faced by NNESTs. Comparative studies examining FETs with different visa statuses (e.g., E-2 vs. D-2) could illuminate how legal status influences professional identity and career trajectories. Learner-based evaluations of FETs' teaching effectiveness would provide valuable insight into the link between identity and instructional practice. Additionally, comparing teachers in private versus public educational settings could reveal the impact of institutional support on identity formation. Longitudinal studies, meanwhile, could trace identity development over time, offering a deeper understanding of how FETs adapt to evolving professional environments. Ultimately, more research is needed to inform ELT policies in South Korea and support a shift toward more inclusive, globally aligned frameworks that recognize and empower non-native English-speaking teachers.

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