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Article

Identity, Investment, and Poetic Autoethnography: Becoming an Agentive TESOL Professional through Critical Translanguaging

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Abstract
Poststructuralist conceptions of learner identity as investment have reshaped English language education by emphasizing the sociocultural positioning of multilingual learners. Yet, the evolving nature of language ideologies and their influence on TESOL professionals' identity and investment remain underexplored from a decolonization perspective. In this poetic autoethnography, I examine how identity, investment, and ideology intersect in my learning and teaching experience. Drawing on earlier personal narratives, fieldnotes from my own EFL writing classrooms and an interview with me by a former student, I trace how pedagogical choices can either reinforce or disrupt dominant language ideologies, shaping learners' and teachers' investments in particular identities. I argue that critical translanguaging in both pedagogical and research practices offers a powerful tool for decolonization by valuing diverse linguistic resources and challenging colonial hierarchies of languages. By weaving together poetic autoethnography and translanguaging, this work foregrounds the lived experiences, plural perspectives, and creative agency of TESOL professionals and learners. It also highlights the importance of viewing language ideology as a diverse, dynamic, and evolving set of beliefs about language, which is central to identity formation among multilinguals. Ultimately, I advocate for a more expansive, critical, and humanizing understanding of identity, investment, and ideology in EFL writing education.

Keywords
Identity, investment, ideology, translanguaging, poetic autoethnography

1 Introduction

The reconceptualization of language learners' identity as an investment in their imagined identities is probably one of the most influential theories in language-related fields such as TESOL. Numerous publications have drawn on Norton's (Norton, 2000; Peirce Norton, 1995) seminar work on identity and an expanded investment model (Darvin & Norton, 2015), which centralizes the dynamics between identity, investment, and ideology in diverse social contexts. This model has become a productive lens to

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study both learners (Teng, 2019; Y. Zhang et al., 2024) and teachers' identity work (Bowen et al., 2021; Ismail et al., 2023) in a multilingual world.

However, much less is known about English as a foreign language (EFL) writing teachers' investment and identity work from a decolonization perspective. A handful of studies have pointed out the importance of writing teacher identity as distinct from language teacher identity (Lee, 2013; Racelis & Matsuda, 2015; You, 2017), but there remains a need to draw on data sources other than interviews (Cheung, 2017). Furthermore, Kubota (2022) and McKinley (2022) call respectively for decolonizing pedagogical and research practices by engaging in (critical) translanguaging (Darvin & Zhang, 2023; Hamman-Ortiz, 2023; P. K. Sah & Kubota, 2022). This requires EFL writing teachers to critically reflect on how coloniality and race-based hegemonies may have shaped their identities (Kubota, 2024).

To understand EFL writing teachers' identity work through the combined lens of investment and decolonization, I engage in an autoethnographic exploration of my evolving ideologies as an Asian EFL learner and writing teacher. A focus on Asia is also strategic as the continent, although teeming with linguistic diversity, has experienced ongoing loss of local languages due to colonial influences such as monolingual policies in education (Abbi & Vatsyayan, 2022). More specifically, I will use this poetic autoethnography to present and reflect on my own journey of moving from a monolingual to a translanguaging identity. It provides fresh insights into how TESOL professionals at large can contribute to the decolonization process through translanguaging (Rabbi, 2023; Rabbidge, 2019; Savski, 2025).

2 Literature Review

2.1 Investment, identity, and ideology

The poststructuralist theory of identity (Darvin & Norton, 2015, 2018; Norton, 2000, 2013; Peirce, 1995) has become a foundational framework in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), as shown in an extensive review of studies in the past three decades (Hajar & Karakus, 2025). Poststructuralists regard identity as "multiple, a site of struggle, and continually changing over time and space" (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 45). Darvin and Norton (2015) also view identity as "a struggle of habitus and desire, of competing ideologies and imagined identities" (p. 45). By reconceptualizing language learning as an investment in imagined identities beyond the classroom, Norton (2000) shifted how TESOL professionals and students (henceforth TESOLers) think about motivation and engagement with the English language. Rather than conceiving learners purely in psychological terms as either motivated or unmotivated, this theory invites language educators to consider learners' decision to participate in learning as dynamically influenced by factors such as power relations, social positionings, and imagined identities. Learners are more likely to invest in the target language practices when classroom language practices align with their imagined identities, i.e., becoming members of a community as mediated by learning English. In addition, what learners choose to invest in is shaped by ideologies or "a normative set of ideas" about languages and other issues—beliefs that have been maintained and promoted as truth by people and systems in positions of power (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 43).

As a socially oriented concept, which Norton (Norton, 2000, 2013; Peirce, 1995) borrowed from Bourdieu's (1986) discussion of capital (primarily in three forms including cultural, economic, and social), investment highlights learners' purposeful engagement with social practices (Darvin & Norton, 2023). The English language functions as cultural capital but can be converted to social capital—through participation in diverse digital communities, for instance—to mediate the learner's relationship with the world (G. Liu, 2023b; G. L. Liu, 2025). It possesses an important symbolic value (Bourdieu, 1991; Kramsch, 2020) that invites learners' investment as they pursue an international identity to be accessed through the English language (Reynolds et al., 2024; Teng, 2019). Learners' investment in English is contingent on its greater social value than non-English languages in a postcolonial world (Pennycook

et al., 2023; Phillipson, 2013). A focus on learner investment thus positions learners as agents who participate in or resist classroom pedagogical practice as powered by their imagined futures (Teng, 2019). Wang and Jiang's (2025) interview-based study, for instance, revealed the fluctuating dynamics between Chinese university students' identity and investment in English medium instruction (EMI) courses. On one hand, English monolingualism continues to dominate the students' imagination and invites their investment in English. On the other hand, they are constrained by their heavy investment in a national identity as they participate in EMI courses. Investment-focused studies of learner identities thus need to contextualize learners and learning socially.

In Darvin and Norton's (2015, 2018) expanded framework, individuals' identity, investment, and ideology are seen as interacting with one another while still being shaped by the broader sociocultural world. Studies explicitly drawing on the expanded framework have examined Asian learners' investment in different English pronunciation or accents (Prakaianurata & Kangkunb, 2024; Y. Zhang et al., 2024), L2 writing (L. Jiang, 2018; Yang & Reynolds, 2022), digital literacies in the wilds (G. Liu & Darvin, 2024; G. L. Liu, 2025), and English learning in diverse institutional contexts (Teng, 2019; Y. Zhang, 2024). A semi-structured interview study (Reynolds et al., 2024) with 15 international students in the multilingual Macau revealed their investment that favors English and Mandarin while distancing from Cantonese and Portuguese. Similarly, a mixed-method study with 15 English program students (G. Liu, 2025) revealed their tendency to favor native English varieties, particularly American English, while some also showed a positive attitude toward local English for the sake of popularity (Prakaianurata & Kangkunb, 2024). These studies showcase the complex dynamics between learners' imagined identities, language ideologies, and investment. Similarly, there has been a significant body of literature on TESOL teachers' investment (e.g., Bowen et al., 2021; Neupane, 2024; Uysal et al., 2024), with an intersection between decolonization and translanguaging (Darvin & Zhang, 2023) in the EFL context.

As for methodology, due to its social orientation, most studies applying the investment model have adopted qualitative approaches. The research topics range from the learning of English (Crowther, 2020; Gilanyi, 2019; Y. Zhang & Gonzales, 2024) to that of other languages, such as Afrikaans, Bangla, and Chinese (Afreen & Norton, 2022, 2024; Iikkanen, 2022; James, 2023; Kwok, 2025). Learners' navigation of the digital world and investment in critical digital literacy have also been explored (G. Liu, 2023a). Other topics include a pre-service teacher's investment in EMI, EFL, and ESL contexts (Y. Zhang & Huang, 2024) and learners' investment in multiple languages (Sung, 2019, 2023). In addition, Yazan and colleagues (Yazan, 2019, 2023; Yazan et al., 2021) have used autoethnographies to study teacher candidates' and teacher educators' identity formation from a poststructuralist perspective, but have not applied the specific investment model. Overall though, these qualitative studies provide empirical evidence to the theoretical relevance of the investment model in a multilingual world.

2.2 EFL writing teachers' investment and decolonization

In contrast, studies of EFL writing teachers' investment in decolonization are rare. Kubota and Motha (2025) recently issued a call to address racial issues in language education. They suggested that language professionals should study their multiple identities by situating them in the ever-changing contexts temporally, spatially, and socially. Language educators should further "scrutinize how these identities and experiences are reproduced in power hierarchies and how they can be transformed for more just human relations" (p. 10). In short, EFL writing professionals should engage in a process of decolonization (Kubota, 2022) by practicing critical reflection (Menard-Warwick, 2024) and adopting innovative research practices including autoethnography (McKinley, 2022; Y. Zheng et al., 2025).

A critical adoption of the investment model for decolonization requires EFL writing professionals to develop discourses to counter othering and native-speakerism. Rooted in ethnocentrism, othering occurs whenever dominant groups use linguistic means to position non-dominant groups' cultures and languages as inferior or deficient (Holliday et al., 2015). In TESOL, othering often surfaces in forms of

native-speakerism that privilege Whiteness and Anglo-normativity as the default standards of linguistic legitimacy while negating the value of non-English languages and deviational linguistic practices (Flores et al., 2020; Tavares, 2022; X. Zheng, 2025; Y. Zheng, 2014). To counter this coloniality inscribed in language education (Pennycook, 1998; Phillipson, 2013), scholars have advocated a translingual/translanguaging perspective that views multilinguals' backgrounds as resources for meaning-making, communication, and identity work (A. S. Canagarajah, 2013; A. L. Jiang & Zhang, 2023; Li, 2018; Tian et al., 2020; Tyler, 2023).

Translanguaging refers to synergic ways of communication that goes beyond any singular linguistic system. García and Li (2014) define translanguaging as "new language practices that make visible the complexity of language exchanges among people with different histories, and releases histories and understandings that had been buried within fixed language identities constrained by nation-states" (p. 21). Building on these insights, in my study, I reflect on my implementation of pedagogical translanguaging as "a pedagogic theory and practice" (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021, p. 18). I also engage in translanguaging-oriented research practice (Jin, 2023) as a means to challenge colonial hierarchies of separating and ranking languages (García, 2019) and knowledge systems (Darvin & Zhang, 2023; A. L. Jiang & Zhang, 2023; Tai & Li, 2024; Y. Zheng & Qiu, 2024). Linking translanguaging with investment magnifies their shared intention to recognize EFL writing professionals' agency, that is, their contextually situated abilities to work with constraints (Ahearn, 2001), without essentializing their identities (Darvin & Norton, 2023).

Moreover, critical translanguaging is needed in both teaching and research practices. Critical translanguaging refers to the integration of often marginalized languages in teaching and academic writing, which can be any non-English language, but particularly heritage languages with less social status (A. S. Canagarajah, 2022; Hamman-Ortiz, 2023; P. K. Sah & Kubota, 2022). As studies have shown, translanguaging involving non-English and non-national languages is often practiced secretly, without institutional support (Sharma, 2018; Tyler, 2023). Through critical translanguaging, language professionals may create "breathing spaces" for the marginalized languages and mitigate learners' disinvestment in these languages (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017; Manan & Hajar, 2022; Savski, 2025; R. Zhang & Chan, 2021).

Investing in (critical) translanguaging encourages us to rethink the "E" in TESOL—not as a fixed, standardized variety of English, but a flexible social practice shaped by multilingual realities and individual agency (A. S. Canagarajah, 2013). Norton's recent work illustrates how her theory can be applied to support the creation of multilingual stories for under-resourced communities to increase multilingual students' engagement with English education around the world (Uysal et al., 2024). The Global Storybooks Portal (Global Storybooks Portal | Literacy for all), which extends the earlier digital African Storybook project initiative by creating and sharing open-access books in African languages (Stranger-Johannessen & Norton, 2019), exemplifies concrete ways to affirm learner identities in their various heritage languages while resisting linguistic hierarchies. Beyond creating multilingual literacy materials, other scholars emphasize the need to interrogate the ideological basis of EMI (De Costa et al., 2020; Fang, 2025). Darvin and Norton (2023) also invite TESOL professionals to "reflect critically on their own worldviews and the extent to which they recognize the diverse resources and the unequal lived realities of learners" (p. 37). Autoethnographic research, which features critical reflection (Chang, 2008), can suit this purpose. There have indeed been a growing number of autoethnographic studies focusing on transnational teachers' experience (e.g., Yazan, 2023; Yazan et al., 2021), showing TESOL's gradual acceptance of this qualitative method.

However, only a few poetic autoethnographies are found that focus on EFL writing teacher's investment and identity work. Yang (2023a) presents an argument that technologies can be decolonized through translanguaging practice and publishing resultant literature. Yang (2023b) explores further the decolonizing potential of translanguaging identity, which highlights multilinguals' intentional use of their communicative resources as a whole. The third study, a collaborative poetic autoethnography (Trinh

et al., 2023) involves one PhD advisor and two graduate students. Through poetry, conversations, and reflections, it shows emotions of the supervision experience, struggles in academia, and ends with a vision that autoethnographic research has the "potential to cultivate a more self-aware, critical scholar" (p. 238). By and large though, creative and critical explorations of EFL writing teachers' investment are still rare.

Informed by the above review, I address the following three questions through poetic autoethnography to provide a deepened understanding of investment and decolonization in the EFL context:

1. To what extent can EFL learners' investment in English learning be linked to the colonial way of thinking about languages?
2. How can EFL learners reconstruct their identities through critical reflection?
3. How can EFL writing teachers engage in (critical) translanguaging for decolonization purposes?

3 The Study

3.1 Context and methodology

Poetic autoethnography is an emergent qualitative method that merges personal narrative with poetic expression to challenge dominant ways of knowing in academia. It builds on autoethnography, which integrates the self (*auto*), culture (*ethno*), and writing (*graphy*), enabling researchers to explore personal experience in its cultural context (Bochner & Ellis, 2022; Chang, 2008). Unlike traditional academic writing that separates researcher and researched, autoethnography embraces their entanglement. For instance, in *The Revision*, Ellis (2009) documents her emotional process of caring for a dying partner while extracting its broader sociological insights. Poetic autoethnography extends this approach by blending it with poetic inquiry, which uses poetry to unravel and communicate new knowledge evocatively (Faulkner, 2020; D. Hanauer, 2021). The added "emotive and evocative" feature of crafted poetry "speaks to what is at the heart of education: connections between people, places, and things" (Fitzpatrick & Fitzpatrick, 2021, p. 9). Through this hybrid practice involving both prose and poetry, poetic autoethnography has become an emergent decolonizing approach that affirms marginalized voices, disrupts dominant research (writing) conventions, and reimagines knowledge production on more inclusive terms (Cooms & Saunders, 2024; Manathunga et al., 2022; Yang, 2023b, 2025).

This poetic autoethnographic study was conducted at an EMI international program in a private university in Thailand, where I became a transnational instructor in 2020. The focal courses—composition and academic writing—are writing-intensive and required for English communication majors. My students are predominantly multilingual learners from across Asia (e.g., Indonesia, Thailand, China, South Korea, Myanmar), along with a few from other countries such as Canada and USA. In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching was moved entirely online. Since then, although classes have returned onsite, online interactions via Microsoft Teams and Google Docs have remained an integral part of my teaching and learning environment.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The data for this poetic autoethnography include several of my published narratives (2013–2024), field notes from two writing courses—an online Composition course in 2020 and an onsite Academic writing course in 2025)—and an interview of myself by a former student concerning my experience of teaching Creative writing (2022), as well as class artifacts such as literacy autobiographies by my former students. The collection of these external data, approved by the institutional human ethics committee,

with students' informed consent, helped to produce important social understandings in autoethnographic research. Table 1 provides a summary of the data.

Table 1
Data Summary

Data types		Year	Data Source
Published narratives	Personal narrative in a monograph	2013	Author
	Personal narrative	2019	Author
	Literacy autobiography in a monograph based on autoethnographic research	2023	Author
Fieldnotes	Composition (online)	2020	Author
	Academic writing (onsite)	2025	Onsite
Class artifacts	Literacy autobiographies	2023, 2024	A Karen from Myanmar; a Thai
	Weekly journals	2025	A Mexican; a Mon from Myanmar
Interview	Data from a senior project	2024	A Chinese

I used three strategies in my poetic inquiry as suggested by Butler-Kisber (2021). First, I drafted impressionistic poems by identifying outstanding metaphors and imagery when reflecting on my experiences as an EFL learner and writing teacher. Doing so, I used "generated poems" to represent my experiences holistically. Next, as I read and reread my collection of external data, I highlighted emotions, metaphors, and imagery related to ideology, identity, and investment. I then drafted "found poems" by embedding words from the textual data to capture my past perspectives. Afterwards, I arranged these poems into "poem clusters" according to the themes of ideology, identity, and investment and emergent themes. To produce aesthetically appealing poetry, I engaged in daily reading and writing of poems during my research process. I also limited my final poems for this poetic autoethnography to exactly 50 words while adding poetic features such as rhythm, thus engaging in crafting my poems. These strategies helped me to strike a balance between being artistic and data-driven.

Unlike traditional qualitative research that uses codes and themes to abstract textual data, I composed "found poems" to analyze and interpret the data. For instance, I wrote in my field notes in 2020:

> The first week of class [in Composition] only introduced some sentence writing basics such as what a simple sentence is. Based on students' silence, I felt that there was too much information, too many new concepts, too overwhelming. Simple sentence, compound sentence, complex sentence, clause, subject, predicate? It must be an information overload of the students. Upon reflection, I decided that I would distribute sentence-writing basics throughout the first half of the semester. Keep the rules simple and minimize the number of rules I introduce each time. For the second week, I will first take a poll to find out what students understand about simple sentences and then provide two rules.

Based on the field notes, I drafted the following poem by embedding the underlined words or ideas:

> *Silence*
>
> Sometimes my teaching was met
> With students' silence
> What a heavy debt!
> Even to teach about simple sentences in a composition class.
> "I must say less," says my teacher's sixth sense.

Thus, I practiced the principles of poetic inquiry in analyzing my original data, turning them into poems to represent their meanings. In my case, I wrote research-based poems to inform my poetic autoethnography.

A total of 52 poems were composed or collected. They fall into four categories: (1) four impressionistic poems based on my reflections over four years of teaching writing in Thailand; (2) forty-two found poems grounded in the above-mentioned field data; (3) three original poems that I wrote in my field notes (marked with *); and (4) three poems written by students for different writing courses that I had taught.

Last, I crafted four 50-word poems by drawing on imagery, metaphors, and phrasing from both the writing by myself or my students. These poems were designed to present a multi-voiced, affectively rich world of writing classrooms. Each poem is followed by a critical reflection that contextualizes the verse, explains its meanings in stories, and connects its significance to relevant scholarly conversations on identity, ideology, and investment. This reflexivity is particularly important in art-based inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2021) and autoethnographic studies on language learning and teaching (Yazan & Keleş, 2024).

4 Findings and Discussion

In this section, I will share three poems as answers to my research questions.

4.1 Whitewashed in English

I was whitewashed in English
A farmer's son from the Yangtze River
At the feet of English, I quiver
Adoring it more than the *Shanshen*—the god of mountain
Rice filled my stomach
English—my mind and soul
I did not live on rice alone,
But on every English alphabet.

I have written about my experience of learning English in China several times (Yang, 2013, 2021, 2023b). In my retelling of my language learning journey through "Whitewashed in English," I take a step further to critique my past learning experiences and associated language ideology. Learning English for me has been a journey of pursuing an upward and go-to-America social mobility. It began with babbling the alphabets after my elder brother, who had just learned the alphabet song at school. Once I started learning it at school formally in 1989, my teachers and extended family began to form in me two main imagined identities: go to college in the city and study abroad. "Study English well, and then you can go to college," my secondary school and high school English teachers all emphasized. And I agreed. English was a required subject, one which claimed the same weight of 150 points in the College Entrance Examination just like Chinese and math. Besides, my aunt in Hong Kong continuously encouraged me through her handwritten letters and postcards, "Study English well and pass TOEFL! Someday you should go to America!" So, even though in the countryside, English tended to be a girls' subject—and both teachers and students alike agree—I embraced it. After I took the College Entrance Exam, without any hesitation, I chose English (language and literature) as my major. I invested in English continuously.

While in college, I again invested in English learning actively by immersing in it. I not only studied the English textbooks produced in China, but also Walkman English, BBC and VOA English. I did all that I could, putting most of my waking time—weekends and holidays included—in learning English. I read through the *Oxford English Pocket Dictionary*, believing that if I could know all the words in the dictionary, if I could follow the definitions in English, I could pass the national English proficiency

exams as well. I also created my own speaking environment by going to the "English Corners"—places where people from different walks of life went to practice their English. Most of my investment in English was pulled by my desired imagined identity as a student studying in the US and a remote idea of wanting to speak, read, write like a "native speaker" of English. Meanwhile, my investment was pushed by a hidden fear of becoming a "Dumb English" speaker, a common social critique of Chinese English learners at my time. They can read and know grammar, but they cannot speak English fluently.

Unfortunately, my early English learning process was one of whitewashing in my outlooks. I became increasingly invested in English language, its culture, and literature. Every day, I spoke English with my classmates. I felt more and more distant from Chinese culture and language and my mother's ethnic Naxi culture and language. English had all the symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that I needed. Being able to speak fluent English with proper pronunciation was highly desirable social goods. It was referred to by one of our Chinese professors as the way to gain our "rice bowls"—a popular saying then that means having a stable job. This symbolic capital was further reinforced into the two landmark proficiency exams we had: Test of English for Majors, Band 4 and Band 8. Studying diligently, as motivated by my native-speaker ideals, I became one of the few from my class of 52 students who passed both exams. This plus other factors such as being an active student leader landed me my first job as a university teacher of English. Many times, I pondered over the possibility of becoming a farmer like my parents, but by learning English, I reinvented myself and my career trajectory. Even my personality changed. I was no longer shy. When speaking English, I became more confident, optimistic, and critical. Nonetheless, I was "whitewashed." A more extensive reflection on this part of my journey can be found in recent book (Yang, 2025).

Whitewashing is global phenomenon. On one hand, when TESOLers promote E as English in a monolingual mode, in particular from a native-speaker perspective, it contributes to a West-centered mindset that disvalues local languages, cultures, literatures, and epistemologies (Fang, 2025). On the other hand, even national curriculum and teachers may follow the same ideology to reproduce West-oriented ways of thinking and being. As I wrote previously (Yang, 2023b), back in high school, I already began to ignore my heritage languages, partially inspired by the textbook story of Karl Marx, who reportedly learned English effectively by forgetting his mother-tongue German. I was whitewashed because English, with its symbolic value, garnered my imagination for my future and lured my whole-hearted investment. I compared my devotion to English to that of "*Shanshen*, god of mountain," which I first evoked in an English poem in 2013. I not only idealized English; I idolized it.

A similar whitewashing process occurred in the lives of many of my Asian students. One student from Thailand, whom I call Jessica (all students' names are pseudonyms), wrote how she gradually rejected both her father's language (Thai) and her mother's language (German) in favor of English, the language of instruction for "international school environment" since nursery. She soon began to switch to speaking English only and regard English as her "mother tongue" (Yang, 2025).

Another Thai student Atid wrote in his literacy autobiography his embrace of English at the cost of Thai and his other heritage language Isan:

> The more I learned English, the more I forgot Thai. But I did not mind the fact that my mother tongue was corroded at all. Why would I still need Thai if I already know English which already allows me to communicate with the whole world? I began to neglect Thai and exclusively used English. I consumed news and media in English. Most people I interacted with could speak English anyway. There was no need for Thai.
>
> …
>
> I spent six years in Ubon Ratchathani province, northeastern Thailand. There, Isan—a blend of Thai-Lao, was the default language (Suwannsang & Chanthao, 2016). But akin to Lanna, there was no Isan formal education. I had to pick up Isan from schoolmates who, seeing that I was an outsider, would always speak to me in distant and impersonal Thai. They would often laugh

> when I tried to speak Isan. Despite their friendliness, I felt ashamed. As a result, my Isan never improved. I could not see myself as a competent Isan speaker and could not claim Isan as part of my multilingual identity, unlike Thai and Lanna. As Pavlenko (2003) argued, imagination plays a crucial role for a person in gaining membership in the desired language community. Since I could not imagine myself speaking Isan fluently, I stopped trying altogether. However, it did not stop me from interacting with my Isan schoolmates. They could speak Thai after all.

These students' experiences show that investment in a non-English language is not totally a matter of personal choice. Like students in Wang and Jiang's (2025) study, ideologies such as monolingualism hold a powerful sway over learners' choices. Leaving it to the hands of monologic policies and practices, students' heritage languages will often suffer. Investment, particularly in non-English heritage languages, needs to be nurtured.

Therefore, as TESOL professionals, we must resist cultural whitewashing in our classrooms. To avoid that, we need to critically examine if and how we have subscribed to native-speakerism, a belief which grants white middle class male speakers unquestioned higher status than other speakers (Holliday et al., 2015). The same is true in my case. In my personal narrative six years ago, I concluded with the following statements:

> My upward social mobility was greatly facilitated by my increasing proficiency in English, until English has turned into my staple food. Therefore, I do not regret my hard work in learning English. In fact, I am thankful for the many benefits that English learning has brought to me, including a career of not hoeing in the cornfield but teaching English to those who aspire to improve their lives by learning the language like I once did. (Yang, 2021)

At that time, I celebrated my investment in English without questioning its monolingual orientation. My personal trajectory of "upward social mobility," made possible through my growing proficiency in English, may also be interpreted as a success story aligned with neoliberalism discourses—those that market English, particularly institutionally sanctioned English, as a vehicle for career advancement, global mobility, and economic opportunity (Piller & Cho, 2013; Surma, 2018; Tavares, 2022). While empowering on the surface, such narratives risk reinforcing neoliberal reasoning in TESOL classrooms by positioning English as the only path to success (Kubota & Motha, 2025). Upon reflection, I recognize the need to critically interrogate these ideologies and to reframe English learning not as a value-free equitable good, but as a complex, sociopolitical process shaped by power, privilege, and resistance (Hall, 2016). To move forward, I need to embrace my colored identities.

4.2 My Other Color

I was a farmer
like my father, hoeing cornfields—
but I grow my crops
in English.
What a career…

Yet wherever I go—
USA, Australia, Thailand—
My other color speaks louder
Still
Through my face, my hair,
my heart, my accent.
Like my mother—

paralyzed—
I shed a silent tear…

This poem hints at my multiple identities: as a farmer, as an EFL writing teacher, as an international student, as a non-native speaker, and as the son of a paralyzed mother. These are the identities often suppressed, marginalized or othered by native-speakerism (Aneja, 2016; Gao, 2024; Pavlenko, 2003). Metaphorically speaking, they are "my other color," which does not usually provide me with a position of power and does not warrant much investment. In fact, as I (Yang, 2021) wrote earlier, my investment in English learning in high school was to go to college and thus shed my farming background. My investment in English learning in college was subsequently powered by my imagined identity as an international student in the US. Yet with my conversion to Christianity in 2000, I began to accept all my backgrounds. I thought to myself, "God has already accepted me just as I am; I don't have to become someone else to be accepted." That was liberating. The identities that I once rejected became a hidden treasure. For instance, I saw myself as a farmer in the creative writing class:

> *Comparing Myself to a Farmer*
> I see myself as a farmer
> And my students fellow farmers
> Some love farming; some abhor it.
> Each of us has a creative writer tree to grow.
>
> I show my process of growing by talking about my hopes
> Frustrations, and excitement.
>
> I try to provide the same opportunities for my fellow farmers
> Through freewriting, peer interactions, and workshops.
> A farmer's job: waiting, cheering, and nurturing
> Eventually, I can enjoy the individual collections of works
> and "masterpieces" of my fellow farmers
> who have been toiling week after week
> word by word
> line by line
>
> (Poem #19, based on interview notes in 2022)

Thus, farming became a lens through which I view my work as an EFL writing teacher. By referencing my farming background, both in this poem and other publications (Yang, 2021, 2023b, 2025), I developed farming as one of my "metaphors to live by" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). It helped me to understand and apply theories such as classroom writing ecology (A. S. Canagarajah, 2020) from a farmer's perspective. This return to my farming background might be partially due to the deaths of both of my farming parents, respectively in 2001 and 2013; I wanted to connect with what I lost. It might also be related to reading the Bible, both by myself and with other believers, and finding several favorable farming-related parables. Recast as a metaphor, my farmer identity became a symbolic resource for meaning making, even after I became an EFL writing teacher.

Further reflection shows that my life has unfolded along two parallel tracks of identity construction. On one track, English—as a global language endowed with symbolic capital—opened pathways for upward social mobility and identity reinvention. Rather than following my father's steps as a farmer, I became a teacher. My spiritual life also transformed: from being shaped by traditional beliefs such as Buddhism, Taoism, and ancestral worship, as well as school-taught ideologies like atheism and

communism, I found a new spiritual home in Christianity. My family life changed too. Instead of marrying a Chinese and continuing a monolingual cultural legacy, I married a white Caucasian, significantly reshaping our family's linguistic and cultural practices. In these ways, my investment in English has expanded my identity options across professional, spiritual, and relational domains.

Yet on another track, I found myself journeying back to reclaim what had been erased. The deeper I was immersed in the English language and its culture, the more I realized that I could not form a holistic sense of self without resurrecting the parts of me that had been silenced, denied, or educated out. My face remains Asian regardless of the transnational spaces I inhabit. No transnational experiences could completely cut me off from the emotional and cultural ties I hold to family, land, and nation. Over time, I began to question the ideologies embedded in my English education—monolingualism and native-speakerism, and the assumed superiority of Western ways of knowing (Yang, 2025). These, as Canagarajah (2020) argues, are not neutral ideals but "bad myths" that constrain multilingual identities. I must accept myself as I am—without donning a white mask (Fanon, 2008) or converting my Eastern ways of thinking to Western ones.

Similarly, many of my multilingual students also began to—through autoethnographic research—revalue their linguistic backgrounds that were once sources of shame and silence (Yang, 2023b, 2025). For instance, Archer, in his autoethnography, embarked on a personal quest to understand his "forgotten [Karen] identity":

> In the later time of my college semester, I came across the [autoethnographic] work by Yang, my professor in the course I was studying in. The author mentioned the prejudice he had about ethnic language as he stated that, "all other languages belonged only to the drunkards, tobacco smokers, and rice farmers in the villages and mountains" (Yang, 2023b, p. 19). After reading about how the author felt about his ethnic language, I was really inspired to research how I ended up not speaking or learning Karen, my native language. (Yang, 2025, p. 151)

Through autoethnographic research, Archer understood that it was illegal for her mother to speak Karen. He also realized the impact of national language policies and ideologies on individual families' (dis) investment (Manan & Hajar, 2022) in heritage languages. Archer's story shows how autoethnographic inquiry can uncover histories of loss while inspiring new pathways of identity investment. As he concluded, "After researching my loss of identity and language, I felt like it was something robbed from me and I'm motivated to start learning it" (p. 152). Whereas a monolingual language policy and practice "robbed" Archer of his heritage language, autoethnographic research—which was introduced in the senior seminar—invited his investment in reclaiming his "forgotten" heritage.

That is why I believe that there is a missing link in the poststructuralist theorization of identity: the need to attend to a fuller and more dynamic view of multilingual teachers' and students' evolving ideologies. Poststructuralists often emphasize identity as fluid and changing (Norton, 2013). However, as previously critiqued (Yang, 2013), identity can also be continued through sharing the same biographical facts, storylines, and metaphors. Additionally, "ideological becoming"—the gradual process of developing one's own ideological position in the social world—is central to one's identity work (Rule, 2015). Recent research on transnational professionals' and students' hybrid identities (A. S. Canagarajah, 2020; Kim & Park, 2020; Seltzer, 2020; Yazan et al., 2021) has shown that one's identity does not have to be completely acculturated to the monolingual English norms. Instead, these individuals use translingual narratives and poetry to agentively assert their transnational identities. I am also reminded of the case of Mili, whose investment in the teaching of Bangla in Canada was ideologically powered by her recognition of its value and openness toward transcultural identities (Afreen & Norton, 2022). Likewise, successful white learners of Afrikaans were influenced by race-crossing ideologies in powerful ways; for example, Tom's learning of Xhosa was rooted in his parents' "progressive" ideology that counters "the government and apartheid and all that" (James, 2023, p. 203). Therefore, as an EFL writing teacher, I must vigilantly guard against the suffocating monolingual ideologies to create favorable conditions for

multilinguals' colored identities to shine in my classrooms.

4.3 Translanguaging in TESOL

I am same same but different.
The *E* in TESOL no longer means *English*—
but *Equity* born and raised
In the global village
of colonial shadows
and critical hopes.
With my students,
I resurrect silenced or severed tongues
To resist the decree
That some languages
are more equal than others.

This poem explores a reimagined TESOL where "E" stands for Equity, not just English. It shows my current pedagogical stance, which challenges the colonial roots of language education that have historically ranked languages on ethnocentric basis (García, 2019). Through translanguaging practices with my students, I aim to reclaim suppressed voices and promote epistemic justice (Kerfoot, 2024; Kerfoot & Bello-Nonjengele, 2023; Y. Zheng & Qiu, 2024). The phrase "same same but different" (เหมือนกันแต่แตกต่าง), a Thai English expression meaning "equality and difference" (Bennui, 2017, p. 250), captures the tension between perceived sameness and real difference—especially in multilingual classrooms where multiple linguistic identities exist yet are unequally valued. Furthermore, the expression "severed tongues" drew inspiration from the journal by a Spanish-English student in my class, who wrote that "my mother tongue [Spanish] was 'cut out of my mouth' because I do consider it a sort of violence" (5J). Finally, like other multilingual speakers in Asia have experienced, in educational spaces, "some languages are more equal than others" (Durairajan, 2019), and yet we do not have to conform to such ruling. Writing this poem thus allowed me to embrace my role as a critical pedagogue who not only teaches but also learns (Freire, 2000) from the many languages once deemed peripheral in my and my students' lives. In this textual space, I take a translanguaging stance to resist monolingual norms in teaching, research, and academic writing (Canagarajah, 2022; Li, 2022; Liu & Chen, 2024).

In my teaching, for instance, I actively sought ways to translanguage beyond the typical "English+" a national language synergy (Canagarajah & Gao, 2019; Sharma, 2018) to engage in critical translanguaging (P. Sah & Li, 2020) by using minority languages in my writing classrooms. For instance, I wrote in a poem based on my fieldnotes on an academic writing class on February 13, 2025:

Translanguaging in Disguise (#30)
I grouped my students by using three Tibetan numbers
"jik" for one, "nee" for two, and "sim" for three
And then the class of 13 students counted their numbers:
"jik," "nee," and "sim"
And my Tibetan students spelled them out for me later
(1.གཅིག; 2.གཉིས།; 3.གསུམ།)
Critical translanguaging?

It was my second time to translanguage by using a non-national language to accomplish part of my teaching—the first time being Mon, an ethnic language in Myanmar. These translanguaging acts had a tangible ripple effect. As one Mon student, who taught an online English class to Mon speakers while taking my academic writing course, wrote in his weekly journal:

> I remember one student, who was usually shy, becoming more active when I encouraged him to explain an English concept in Mon first before translating it into English. This approach not only boosted his confidence but also helped other students understand the lesson better. Similar to the ESL teacher in Garcia's (2018) article [*Translanguaging, Pedagogy and Creativity*] who trusted students to use their languages to enhance learning, I also encouraged my students to draw from their full language resources. García highlights that translanguaging provides students with more ways to express their ideas, which I found to be true in my classes as well. (5J, 2025)

Note that Garcia's study, part of my recommended reading materials for the course, is mentioned in the Mon student's journal. Although multilingual speakers are believed to have a natural inclination to translanguage (Li, 2018), I believe that EFL writing teachers can nurture their students' translingual subjectivity by exposing them to non-monolingual ways of becoming (A. S. Canagarajah, 2020). By engaging in pedagogical translanguaging, I join other practitioners who use translanguaging to challenge the colonial language hierarchies and hence decolonize their classrooms (Darvin & Zhang, 2023; Tyler, 2023). The growth of my students' translanguaging identity was thus partially attributable to their concrete translanguaging experiences in class, and partially to, assigned reading of and responding to translanguaging theories. Even so, TESOLers must remember that conditions for translanguaging differ for teachers and students (Yang, 2023b), that investment can be compulsory or voluntary, depending on power dynamics in class (Yang, 2013), and that language ideologies favoring standard written English will continue to influence multilingual students' investment in translanguaging (Xu & Gibbons, 2025). Therefore, translanguaging in TESOL (Tian et al., 2020) will need concerted efforts by both teachers and learners (Hamman-Ortiz, 2023).

5 Conclusion and Implications

Granted, this poetic autoethnography is limited. To start, focusing on one EFL learner and writing teacher's unique experience makes the findings less generalizable. Future studies may consider collaborative autoethnographies to include more contexts and perspectives. Quantitative and mixed-method designs drawing on insights from this study may provide new understandings about coloniality, investment, and translanguaging concerning a larger population.

Despite these limitations, I hope that through my poetic autoethnography, I have brought into focus the most salient aspects of my identity work as an EFL learner and writing teacher. I first critically examined through my poem "Whitewashed in English" how my early ideological alignment with the colonial, monolingual language ideology shaped my investment in English learning. Over time, however, I began to reconnect with my marginalized identities, as represented by "My Other Color." Subsequently, I traced in my poem "Translanguaging in TESOL" a shift toward a sustained investment in (critical) translanguaging.

These insights speak to broad conversations in TESOL where teacher identity is increasingly recognized as central to teacher development (Tajeddin & Yazan, 2024; Yazan, 2023) and where decolonization through translanguaging and autoethnographic research is gaining traction (S. Canagarajah, 2025; Darvin & Zhang, 2023; Kubota, 2022; Nisa-Waller & Piercy, 2024; P. Sah & Fang, 2025). Without a conscious engagement with how identity is mediated through both English and non-English resources, educators, learners, and researchers risk reproducing a hegemonic structure rooted in colonialism, linguistic imperialism, and neoliberalism in our classrooms among our learners (A. S. Canagarajah, 2010; Kubota & Motha, 2025; Piller, 2016). Alternatively, we may begin to decolonize our minds (Memmi, 2021) through (critical) translanguaging (Darvin & Zhang, 2023) and humanize TESOL (D. I. Hanauer, 2012; Ortega, 2024; Peercy et al., 2025) by interrogating how our investments and identities are shaped by dominant ideologies.

This study also has implications for the further development of the investment model. First, the potential for one's multiple identities, as expressed by "my other color," to sustain across spaces through identity categories, narratives, and metaphors needs to be integrated (Price, 1996; Yang, 2013). Acknowledging continuity will help explain the investment of individuals and communities to reclaim their lost linguistic heritage or maintain it. Second, the investment model can be expanded to include raciolinguistics (Flores et al., 2020; Tsai et al., 2024), which may add a decolonization edge to it. Being "color-blind" (Brown et al., 2023), we TESOLers may fail to recognize ways in which colonial racial relations may have been normalized and lose out the opportunity to wrestle with identity tensions (Tajeddin & Yazan, 2024) in our field as agentive English teachers. Last, investment, identity, and ideology all contain both an autobiographic aspect, which tends to be anonymized, and a multilingual dimension, which tends to be standardized. For a more just multilingual world, it may be time for TESOL to embrace an autoethnographic/translanguaging orientation so that multilinguals can become epistemological subjects who contribute new, critical, and creative knowledge under their own names.

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