

Chapter 3

Overcoming Racism and Discrimination: Experiences of Vietnamese ESL Teachers in Canada

Elena Tran

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6839-1584>

Niagara College, Toronto, Canada & Sheridan College, Canada

Thu Thi-Kim Le

*Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and Education, Vietnam & University of Windsor,
Canada*

ABSTRACT

Although the global workforce becomes increasingly diverse, many minority groups are still standing in the path of multiple forms of exclusion. Among them are the non-White and non-native English-speaking teachers who are striving to prove their credentials and secure their careers throughout the world. The purpose of this paper is to examine the challenges faced by two Vietnamese ESL teachers pursuing their careers in Ontario, Canada. The researchers utilized a collaborative autoethnography approach developed by Ngunjiri et al. (2010) to share and analyze their experiences. This involved four key steps: preliminary data collection, subsequent data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and report writing. Through this iterative process, they engaged in both individual and team activities, revisiting previous steps to enhance data collection, analysis, or interpretation as needed. The findings revealed the unique obstacles that they encountered from various sources, including society, schools, students, and native-speaking colleagues. These challenges encompassed systemic discrimination against minority Asian professionals when recrediting their credentials, marginalizing the hiring process and being treated as outsiders within the field. By amplifying their unheard voices, the researchers aim to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable English as a Second Language (ESL) industry in Ontario.

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Overcoming Racism and Discrimination

Higher education studies, over the past decades, have explored different issues regarding being a non-native English-speaking teacher (NNESTs) in different English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching markets. Many of them (Amin, 1997, 2000; Braine, 2013; Butler, 2007) have shown that there is an intrinsic connection between race and teachers' credibility. Particularly, it is evident that NNESTs in different parts of the world have not shared the same status as their native English-speaking colleagues (NESTs). The discrimination has carried undue influences at societal and global levels (Braine, 2013; Butler, 2007). For example, knowledge and ability of NNESTs in Hong Kong are questioned because of the belief that non-native English teachers are inferior, threatening their authority and confidence in classrooms (Norton & Tang, 1997). In Japan, NNESTs are discredited by parents who want their children to be taught by NESTs (Takada, 2000). Students studying English also want NESTs in classrooms because these teachers are considered better models for students since they have native pronunciation, cultural knowledge, better vocabulary and understanding of grammar (Clark & Paran, 2007; Silva, 2009).

In Canada, NNESTs have also experienced students' negative attitudes, unfair treatment, and complicated regulations from the government (*Ontario Helping Newcomers Start Their Careers*, 2021). In her study interviewing adult ESL students from different racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, Amin (1997) concluded that students' assumptions and stereotypes, such as only White people are *real*, *proper*, *Canadian*, or only White people can be native speakers of English, disempowered NNESTs as authentic ESL teachers (p. 580). These challenges highlight the need for empirical studies to address the unique difficulties NNESTs encounter in their profession. As an act of protest against discrimination towards NNESTs, we voice our direct experiences and sentiments in trying to find our place in the Ontario ESL industry. To do that in the most authentic way possible, we would like to employ the method of collaborative autoethnography and embark on a conversational tone, using personal pronouns throughout this chapter.

We came to Canada as "federal skilled workers" and one of us is a "Ph.D. scholarship holder" with extensive international teaching experience and official ESL training and degrees, but we both struggled to enter and develop in the Canadian ESL industry. The greatest challenges we face are *Canadian credentials* and *Canadian work experience*. It is neither *how much* nor *how relevant* credentials and experience we have; the key word here is *Canadian*. We need to find jobs to finance our education in Canada, but we need Canadian degrees to apply for professional employment. Anyone with common sense could see the inherent "Canadian credentials" versus "Canadian work experience" trade-off. The crucial criterion of having Canadian work experience further compounds our challenge of finding jobs as many ESL teaching positions require at least two years of teaching history *inland*. Like many other internationally trained colleagues in Canada, we are stuck in a never-ending loop, desperately trying to break free.

Inspired by Thomas's (1999) study, we identified our key challenges and grouped them into three levels: institutional – from society, organizational – from schools, and interpersonal – from students and native-speaking colleagues. The minority voices like ours need to be shared to complete the current equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) picture. By deeply discussing this topic, we hope that policymakers, educational institutions, and teacher training programs can gain valuable insights into challenges, as well as specific needs of non-native ESL teachers. This knowledge can inform the development of inclusive policies, training programs, and support structures that empower non-native educators, foster intercultural competence, and improve the quality of ESL education in Ontario multicultural classrooms.

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