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Negotiating ‘ares,’ ‘cans,’ and ‘shoulds’ of being and becoming in English language teaching: two teacher accounts from one Japanese university

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ABSTRACT
This study, utilizing narrative inquiry underpinned by poststructural theory, explores the lived experiences of two university-level English language teaching (ELT) professionals negotiating ‘borders’ of essentialized and idealized being and becoming, in seeking to account for the movement, hybridity, and diversity characterizing identity and interaction in and beyond ‘Japan.’ These borders relate to essentialized and idealized ‘ares,’ ‘cans,’ and ‘shoulds’ of ‘Japaneseness,’ juxtaposed against ‘Otherness’ predicated on ‘nativeness’ in English. In negotiating positionality, the two teachers choose to both discursively ‘trouble’ and not trouble who they, their colleagues, and their students ‘are,’ ‘can,’ and/or ‘should’ be or become, in complex and seemingly ‘contradictory’ ways. The study notes that the creation, limitation, and elimination of space for identity in ELT is sociohistorically, contextually, and fluidly connected to the local/global construction, maintenance, and/or challenging of borders of identity and community membership in the settings in which learning, use, and instruction take place.

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Teacher identity; privilege–marginalization; criticality; narrative inquiry

Introduction
This study, situated in a tertiary English department in Japan, explores the lived experiences of two self-defined, critically oriented, female, English language teaching (ELT) professionals negotiating positionality. Employing narrative inquiry grounded in poststructural commitments, the study examines how Hikari and Saoirse wrestle with who they, their colleagues, and their students ‘are,’ ‘can,’ and/or ‘should’ be or become, personally–professionally, as learners, users, and instructors of English, and as members of the community/ies in which they live, study, and work. Their co-constructed narratives are powerful catalysts for, and contributions to, ‘critical’ dialogue within the field of ELT seeking to attend to learner, user, and instructor identity, experience, and agency, and to address inequity.

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In this article, we begin by succinctly reviewing both the literature in which the study is situated and to which it contributes. Next, we provide an overview of the study, which was guided by the following research question: how do participants apprehend their lived experiences negotiating positionality as self-defined, female, critically oriented, ELT professionals? We then present the co-constructed narratives, and close the article both by discussing the narratives through a poststructuralist lens and providing a few implications of the study for criticality in ELT.

Theoretical framework

In this study, we draw upon poststructural theory to conceptualize identity as dynamically, discursively, and contextually negotiated at the interstices of fluidly local–global linguistic, cultural, ethnic, national, economic, religious, educational, professional, and gender-related discourses of being and becoming (Bhabha, 1994; Davies & Harré, 1990). Gannon and Davies (2007) define discourses as 'complex interconnected webs of modes of being, thinking, and acting. They are in constant flux and often contradictory. They are always located on temporal and spatial axes, thus they are historically and culturally specific' (p. 82). These discourses construct essentialized, discursive 'borders' that define the bounds of Self–Other, purity, correctness, and value, relating to 'language,' 'culture,' 'place,' and 'identity' (Rutherford, 1990), and that shape idealized notions of who learners, users, and instructors are, 'can,' and/or 'should' become, within communities and ELT situated therein (Rudolph, 2016). Such borders are patrolled (Fine, Jaffe-Walter, Pedraza, Futch, & Stoudt, 2007) by individuals and groups, with the intention of cultivating, drawing upon, and maintaining power. In apprehending, problematizing, challenging, reifying, and crossing such borders, individuals dynamically and discursively negotiate their subjectivity (Weedon, 1997) by positioning themselves and being positioned by others in contradictory ways (Davies, 1991).

Although, through this lens, individuals negotiate identity in interaction with others and their environment (which they and others have potentially inscribed with 'meaning'), they may, with varying degrees of influence and authority, assert 'agency.' This agency is an individual's capacity to problematize or 'trouble' (Lather, 1991; Vaughan, 2004) dominant and critically oriented discourses of being and knowing in their dynamic negotiation of positionality (Davies, 1991), as well as to potentially not trouble, and/or perpetuate, such discourses.

Literature review

In the field of ELT, critically oriented scholarship has contended that privilege and marginalization can be experienced fluidly (e.g. Houghton & Rivers, 2013; Park, 2017; Rudolph, Selvi, & Yazan, 2015). This strand of inquiry has thus led to both implicit and explicit attention to the agency of learners (Rudolph, 2016) and teacher-learners (Aneja, 2016; Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Park, 2015), and to their apprehension, problematization, and patrolling of borders of being and becoming, in complex and (seemingly) conflicting ways. Such scholarship has served to destabilize the dominant, critically oriented, normalized 'assumption' that identity, experience, inequity, and agency can and should be apprehended categorically (e.g. 'native speaker'/'non-native speaker' or 'native English speaker teacher' [NEST]/'non-native English speaker teacher' [NNEST]). Scholars have thus contended that critically oriented inquiry
and professional activities employing essentializing categories of identity have hindered exploration of agency, and have, more detrimentally, stripped learners, users, and instructors of their discursive voice (Yazan & Rudolph, 2018).

Postmodern and poststructural scholarship attending to discursive negotiations of identity and experience in Japan and ELT therein has asserted that since the beginning of the Meiji period in the 1860s, an essentialized and idealized notion of a ‘homogeneous Japan,’ and of essentialized and idealized ‘Japaneseness,’ has been perpetuated and patrolled (Befu, 2009; Rivers, 2011; Toh, 2016). This Japaneseness has sought to define borders of membership in Japanese society, as well as Japaneseness–Otherness, with relation to the ‘world beyond’ Japan. Scholars have contended that these essentialized and idealized constructions overlook, devalue, ignore, and even deny Japan's history as a site of movement, diversity, and hybridity (e.g. Denoon, Hudson, McCormack, & Morris-Suzuki, 2001; Willis & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2008). The essentialization of Japaneseness–Otherness has also fluidly involved local–global discursive equation of participation in the ‘global community,’ with ELT predicated on the essentialized knowledge, skills, behavior, and experiences of an idealized white, western, male, native speaker of English (e.g. Kubota, 2013; Toh, 2016). This is despite the fact that members of Japanese society interact with a diverse array of individuals in and beyond Japan – the majority of whom hail from Asia – and, in the process, encounter diverse varieties, functions, contexts, and users of English, use Japanese as a lingua franca, and employ other languages (Kubota, 2013; Rudolph, 2017).

Scholarship has additionally contended that binary-oriented approaches to identity in ELT, dominant and critically oriented, have served to reinforce borders of essentialized and idealized Japaneseness, and juxtaposed Otherness (e.g. Rivers, 2016; Rudolph, 2017). This has, in turn, resulted in manifested degrees of professional othering of individuals, whose identities do not correspond to some degree, with idealized constructions of Japaneseness and Otherness (Yazan & Rudolph, 2018).

The current study seeks, within the field of ELT, to contribute to critically oriented, postmodern and poststructural dialogue relating to the contextualized, discursive negotiation of positionality, and to trouble normalized, critical assumptions regarding identity, experience, inequity, and agency.

The study

This study is situated in the English department of a university exclusively catering for ‘women’ in Japan. The study is chronotopic (Blommaert, 2015) as it is a sociohistorically situated, incomplete, and intertextual (Allen, 2011) co-construction of time–space that extends beyond the confines of institution and location. In 2016, one researcher connected with the participants, Hikari and Saoirse, due to their shared, critically oriented approach to inquiry and practice, and professional activities. We invited them to participate in the present study after dialoguing with them regarding their lived experiences negotiating positionality, and asserting agency to trouble essentialized discourses of identity in their personal–professional lives. Both participants readily accepted.
**Approaching the study**

We employed the lens of narrative inquiry grounded in poststructuralist commitments (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014; Rudolph, 2016; Tamboukou, 2010). Narratives, through such a lens, are ‘a hybridity of fiction and life, or rather a matrix of the lived, the desired and the imagined, an assemblage of actualities and virtualities that constitute the real: life and texts’ (Tamboukou, 2010, p. 4). Narratives are sociohistorically situated, negotiated and co-constructed, non-linear, conflicted and controversial, intertextual, and interpretable in numerous ways (Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2008; Tamboukou, 2010). Approaches to narrative inquiry, drawing upon poststructural theory, problematize the idea of individuals as ‘repositories of knowledge – treasuries of information awaiting excavation’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p. 68), ready and able to share ‘truths’ about people, places, and experience, leading to participant, researcher, and reader understanding of ‘reality’ (Britzman, 1995; Vaughan, 2004). Such an approach is not eliminating ‘self’ or story, but is instead problematizing the notion of a ‘unified, monolithic, reified, essentialized subject capable of fully conscious, fully rational action’ (Lather, 1991, p. 120). Poststructural approaches to ‘self,’ ‘truth,’ and ‘story’ are therefore predicated on the notions that:

multiple, disunified subjectivities [are] involved in the production and understanding of narratives, rather than singular, agentic storytellers and hearers, and it [is] preoccupied with the social formations shaping language and subjectivity. In this tradition, the storyteller does not tell the story, so much as she/he is told by it. (Squire et al., 2008, p. 4)

Peters and Humes (2003) assert that poststructural inquiry ‘inquires into where it [self] comes from and how it functions – it analyses its positionality, its discursive formations and its historical becomings’ (p. 111). Narrative inquiry through a poststructural lens is thus a subjective co-construction, exploration, and deconstruction (Derrida, 2016) of the discursive construction, perpetuation, and patrolling of essentialized borders of being and knowing, and of individuals’ negotiation of identity and agency – of discursive positioning and being positioned (Davies, 1991; Peters & Humes, 2003; Tamboukou, 2010). Participation in, and interaction with, narrative inquiry can serve as a catalyst for dialogue, and can allow individuals to reflect on positionality.

**Data collection, analysis, and presentation**

Initially, one researcher met with the participants for informal chats for approximately three months. We then began collecting data through the use of co-constructed interviewing. These interviews, largely occurring in English, totaled approximately 150 minutes in length per participant. We recorded the interviews directly onto a password-protected computer, stored them under each participant’s pseudonym, and then transcribed the interviews and reviewed their contents. Japanese translations are our own. These data, we concluded, afforded us ‘discursive evidence and background’ (Vaughan, 2001, p. 20) for apprehension of Hikari’s and Saoirse’s discursive negotiations of positionality.

Researchers’ self-reflexive attention to positionality is bound up with negotiation of the ‘crisis of representation’ (Marcus & Fischer, 1988, pp. 14–15). Choi (2006) contends that reflexivity, through a poststructural lens, is not intended to ‘increase the validity or to find the researcher self, as if the researcher self is out there independent of relations; rather, conversely, the purpose of reflexivity is to deconstruct the authority of the researcher’
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(p. 441). Throughout the research and writing process, we maintained communication with Hikari and Saoirse, sharing our apprehensions of their negotiations of identity. Soon after data collection began, we were confronted with the strength and resolve Hikari and Saoirse displayed. They willingly chose to share lived experiences that could potentially threaten their personal–professional trajectories and well-being. Thus, our practice of self-reflexivity involved attending to our positionality, and that of our participants as well.

We have attempted to present the co-constructed narratives in a manner that honors Hikari’s and Saoirse’s desire to contribute to transforming the field of ELT and critically oriented theory, inquiry, and practice therein, and to transformative dialogue destabilizing idealized Japaneseness, while closely guarding their anonymity. Therefore, we provide few identifiable details relating to them and our connection to them, and the other individuals, places, events, and relationships discussed herein. Our path for carrying out the study, storing and protecting data, and writing this article conformed to the Science Council of Japan’s (2013) Code of Conduct for Scientists, which outlines ethical research intended to protect participants, researchers, and Japanese society in general. Additionally, the narratives may appear to be linear, although this is the product of our interaction with participants and not a purposeful goal to share concrete, all-encompassing truths about their lives.

Findings

Hikari’s narrative

Hikari is a self-identified bilingual, female, Japanese, ELT professional. From a young age, she wrestled with who she was told she was, and could be, as a ‘female’ in Japanese society. School, for Hikari, was a site of intense negotiations of positionality. Her love for learning was problematized by her teachers as an obstacle in Japanese society: ‘Teachers would tell me that I couldn’t like to study, because if I’m smart, men won’t marry me … they didn’t value my education.’ For Hikari, the patrolling of femininity also manifested physically: ‘We had uniform checks performed by male teachers,’ Hikari remembers, ‘and they would look at the color of our underwear, because it might provoke boys … and I just couldn’t take it or I would break.’ Contemplating dropping out of school altogether, Hikari located a program in western Canada where she could attend high school. Her mother agreed: ‘My mom was very understanding. She said this is like bullshit. I wanted to quit the school, and she said “do it.”’ Hikari’s father, however:

really didn’t understand how bad it was for me, and how I was faced with the sexism, but I guess to him, as an older male, he really didn’t understand, it was normalized. It wasn’t like he wasn’t compassionate. He cared … (Hikari)

Her father, Hikari notes, ‘thought I was running away from education, but I was running toward it.’ After further discussion, Hikari’s father gave his blessing.

In the program, Hikari felt free, as ‘gender didn’t matter, and so I was like a sponge, sucking up everything.’ Following graduation, Hikari entered university in eastern Canada, to study sociolinguistics, and then decided to pursue graduate studies. After eight years in Canada, however, she chose to do so in Japan, to be close to family. Future employability in Japan was another concern. Also, her father worried that her ‘Japanese was diminished and [my] foreignness increased.’ This did not matter to Hikari. Thus, Hikari headed back to Japan to matriculate in a prestigious national university.
In Japan, Hikari found the ‘authenticity’ of her Japaneseness challenged: ‘I was constantly put down and told that I was not Japanese or I’m a foreigner, or that I’m weird,’ Hikari recalls. This was particularly true in her graduate program, wherein ‘they perceived me as a threat.’ Hikari believes this related to her identity as a linguistic, cultural, academic, and national border-crosser, which challenged dominant, essentialized constructions of ‘Japaneseness’ and ‘Otherness.’ Hikari notes that ‘my classmates, my parents, my friends (and) my professors’ participated in challenging her unique way of being Japanese: ‘I spoke Japanese, and one of the things that I hated, and still hate to this day, is how they judged my Japanese ability.’ She remembers ‘people were really happy when I made mistakes, and they would look for mistakes in my writing and my speech, and they would call me “foreigner.”’ Hikari’s graduate program advisor was particularly abusive: ‘he gave me a really hard time, because he told me that he hated when I “acted like a foreigner,” and it was about my facial expressions that I make when I am speaking English; my gestures … ’ Her advisor also informed her that ‘I won’t go far in Japan with my foreign mannerisms,’ which she partially interpreted as preparing her for working in Japan.

Hikari chose to ‘perform’ Japaneseness in the interest of graduating. ‘Performing’ idealized Japaneseness, for Hikari, included displaying behavior corresponding with ‘female’ membership in a patriarchal, ‘authoritative’ society, wherein ‘you have to hold back your opinions as a younger, female, newbie. You just don’t talk about your opinions with older people – they have the floor.’ Hikari continued to ‘perform,’ personally–professionally, to both survive and thrive: ‘My identity doesn’t correspond with a binary at all, but I mean, I understand that a lot of people have this binary view, and I learnt to be – act – more “Japanese.”’ Hikari believes that this aided her in obtaining her current job, as a tenure-track assistant professor, in a department with explicit value and roles assigned to faculty located within one of two idealized categories of identity: ‘Japanese “NNEST”/non-native Japanese speaking, white, western “NEST.”’

When first entering the department, Hikari discovered it was cliquish, with Japanese faculty divided along lines of field of study, administrative duties, and gender. Hikari was immediately approached by a group of male Japanese professors. When interacting with them, Hikari often encountered ‘low key sexist stuff,’ or ‘mansplaining,’ related to her status as a newly wedded female. Hikari defines this ‘mansplaining’ as both her male and female colleagues’ attempts at defining and imposing parameters of femininity, professionalism, and Japaneseness, upon her and others. Hikari was simultaneously told ‘I should have children and things like that,’ and ‘you shouldn’t have children, or you shouldn’t trouble your colleagues by having children.’ Although bothered, Hikari continued not to ‘trouble anybody,’ until the department experienced a case of sexual harassment and two student pregnancies. The department’s handling of these situations ‘was the start of me troubling who students and teachers could or should become,’ Hikari recalls.

The sexual harassment case in question related to students being pursued by a part-time, international teacher. Hikari and a group of faculty members, including departmental leadership, interviewed the students and the part-time faculty member. Ultimately, only one student followed through with their complaint. The treatment of the remaining student left Hikari angry, hurt, and desiring transformative change:

There was so much misogyny and victim-blaming going on in that situation… [starts crying] … I was really upset about that, because [recounts the student’s account of harassment occurring outside the university] when the student brought this up to the school, I mean [some of] the
teachers really judged her, because she, because apparently a woman is not supposed to go to (), 4 and apparently that () is considered consent for whatever he wants to do to her, in some people’s mind. And because she went to (), a number of teachers thought that they can’t defend her, and that it was their [her] fault, and she shouldn’t have behaved like that.

The key catalyst shaping Hikari’s approach to troubling discourses of identity related to faculty questioning of the remaining student’s Japaneseness. After the student had shared her story:

as soon as she leaves, one of the teachers – a female teacher – screamed – she was like ‘she’s a foreigner, and she doesn’t know better.’ And I was like speechless. I couldn’t call her out, and TO THIS DAY I am like really angry with myself. (Hikari)

Although born and raised in Japan, and a citizen, the student was called a ‘foreigner’ as her mother was originally from another East Asian country, rendering her ‘less Japanese’ for the faculty member. Exasperated, Hikari ‘knew I had to stand up for her, because the other two teachers decided that what they want is for her to be gone, and not the sexual harassment perpetrator.’ Hikari was aware that contradicting the opinions of her senior colleagues was dangerous, ‘because in their views, it was the girl’s fault because she went to (), and brought this upon herself, and if we get rid of this troublesome girl, we’re good to go.’

Hikari approached one key faculty member and told him ‘this teacher had to go.’ The individual’s response caught her off-guard. ‘That was the first time this professor yelled at me,’ Hikari remembers; ‘I think he was telling me to resign.’ The berating continued: ‘He was just bullying me, and he was just threatening me to shut up and get lost. I was a FIRST YEAR contract teacher, not tenured, fresh out of grad school!’ This, however, would not silence Hikari. Instead, she ‘went to the head of the department, and I kind of threatened him and I told him about the other teachers,’ as well as sharing alleged details regarding the behavior of the part-time teacher. Yet she suffered in silence: ‘I couldn’t sleep, I couldn’t eat because I was scared.’ Hikari sensed ‘it was more important for some professors to maintain categories of identity … borders of Japaneseness and of harmony, and roles in the department to be maintained, than it was to deal with ().’

Soon after, two of the students whom Hikari was charged with advising became pregnant, ‘and one professor wanted to expel the students and the same professor wanted to make one student go into maternity leave when she didn’t want to … [they said] “A good student wouldn’t get pregnant.”’ Hikari responded: ‘if we needed anyone’s opinion, it would be the doctor’s, and not the teachers’ … We’re here to assist the students.’ Her words were ‘something he had never heard, and it made him angry, and during the course of a week or so, my femininity – my being a woman – was really attacked.’ This included comments such as ‘if I was going to have children, and what my husband thinks, and that it is his choice not mine, if I decide to have children, don’t trouble the faculty.’ When the second student became pregnant, she refused maternity leave. Hikari reported this to the department, and ‘thanked the teachers for being cooperative, because we didn’t force her into maternity leave [laughs].’

Another male faculty member, responsible for academic affairs, stated ‘it was unexpected and how abnormal and unexpected and irregular this (situation) has been, and the trouble he had been through.’ In response, Hikari ‘asked him, politely, not to say things like that.’ Her colleague ‘got really angry and said he’ll think whatever he wants, he’ll say whatever he wants, he’ll judge people the way he wants, and he said if you don’t want to be judged, you shouldn’t get pregnant.’ Throughout the exchange, Hikari notes, ‘he yelled at me, and it was a clear show of aggression, and I got really scared.’ At that point, Hikari realized, ‘it
wasn’t sexual harassment, or pregnancy, but misogyny, and an authoritative way of communication and being. I felt if students went outside of their expected femininity or good student-ness, this is going to happen, and I was very threatened. Hikari would not back down, however: ‘I started to call it out, because I had enough of it.’ After hearing from her new colleague Saoirse about a student of hers who had hidden her pregnancy to avoid punishment, Hikari persuaded the department to alter the attendance policy, so that such absences would be excused.

As events unfolded, Hikari increasingly drew upon her and her students’ lived experiences in the classroom. In her courses, ‘I talk about myself, and I make my classroom a safe space for students; I advocate for the idea that difference is good; diversity is good [laughs]. I talk a lot about patriarchy, sexism … um [laughs].’ Hikari shares with her students regarding being a married professional, and that ‘I had to deal with a load of sexism,’ including ‘who I’m supposed to be as a wife. I’m constantly told by my colleagues to go home and cook my husband dinner and stuff like that, and I’m like um, WHAT? That’s not really related to our professional relationship …’ She also shares from her lived experiences as a border-crosser. Hikari believes that in sharing, she is problematizing borders of femininity and Japaneseness, nativeness in English, and what goals and ‘success’ look like. She notes, ‘when I’m in the classroom, I try not to reinforce one value, or my values per se. I say that there are many different values, like some people think this, and that …’ Hikari believes that, generally speaking, her classroom approach is well received by students: ‘They like it … They smile … I think they see me as an interesting person, and whether they like me or not, they are very curious about my views.’ She also knows her approach differs from some of her other female, Japanese colleagues. This was confirmed when ‘I attended a school event, I heard a female teacher telling them to be good women at their graduation ceremony, and I didn’t agree with her view … It’s called benevolent sexism …’ (original emphasis). Hikari apprehends the ‘dominant discourse’ underpinning education in the department as ‘benevolent sexism. They are trying to make good women, good wives, good mothers, right – I think that’s the starting point.’ Those faculty or students who resist suffer consequences: ‘people who don’t fit into the ideal Japaneseness or good student or good female student, they get all this bullshit.’

Hikari’s negotiation of positionality continues. Her encounters with discourses of sexism and misogyny are ‘happening all the time in Japanese.’ She is told, for example, ‘Yappari onna no hito ni umaretan dakara – kodomo ga ii ne’ [‘Well, you were born a woman, and therefore having children is the thing to do’]. Hikari believes some of this talk is well meaning: ‘People want to show me that this is a good place – a safe space to have children, but at the same time they are nosy.’ In other cases, she is referred to, angrily, with the informal and unprofessional ‘omae’ [you]. Now, however, Hikari resists: ‘I’m not giving people space for mansplaining.’ She has begun avoiding socializing with certain faculty. She regularly problematizes her colleagues’ discourse: ‘I confront it all the time. I tell them, that’s sexism.’ Hikari feels transformative change is slowly occurring, departmentally. Following being yelled at a second time, she returned to her office, crying. Her colleague then came and said ‘I was really angry, but then I thought about it, and now I’m calm. I appreciate you telling me this … I will try not to talk this way in front of people, if this is so bad.’ Hikari notes, ‘So, I said thank you. And he said thank you. And that was transformative.’
Dealing with some female Japanese colleagues, however, remains challenging for Hikari. She notes, ‘I’m more scared about being judged by Japanese women.’ One particular female in leadership, who had, earlier, questioned a student’s Japaneseness, was of particular concern:

Her view of femininity, being a good woman; I disagree with that. She has a 大和撫子 [yamato nadeshiko] view. I can call out my Japanese male colleagues all I want, but () was the one I couldn’t call out when she showed so much sexism. And how our student, whose mom is [from elsewhere], was treated. (Hikari)

Hikari had revisited that experience countless times, ‘wonder(ing) if it might be because of that …’ Although Hikari is aware that ‘most of my colleagues are feminists,’ she yet encounters female colleagues who reinforce essentialized and idealized notions of being ‘feminine,’ ‘professional,’ and ‘Japanese.’

The challenges of negotiating positionality in the department have taken a toll on Hikari, but have not diminished her spirit: ‘Yeah, well, I’ve been pretty angry, yeah, I’ve been very very angry, and I’ve been really upset, not eating, and crying and things [laughs nervously] but, um [laughs] I’m fighting back!’ When asked what keeps her going, Hikari responded: ‘I dunno … I think it’s kinda for myself and for my students … It’s bigger than language education … It’s about identity, it’s about human rights being who you are and not being threatened for you who are.’ Hikari acknowledges the important role her husband plays in her life: ‘I have a supportive husband. He listens. He’s not as angry as I am. He’s very calm … He listens. And he tells me to do the right thing and fight for the students.’

Hikari has troubled discourses to a degree that extends beyond the department. Following her experiences with student-related issues mentioned earlier, Hikari took the detailed records she had kept and shared them with the university’s ombudsman. This individual was highly sympathetic, and asked her whether he could share them with university leadership. For Hikari, this was risky, as she was yet untenured. The notion that transformative change might occur prompted her, however, to be ‘willing to risk things.’ For Hikari, the unstable situation ‘doesn’t stop me from saying what I want to or being who I am.’

**Saoirse’s narrative**

Saoirse is a self-identified multilingual, female, Irish, ELT professional who has lived and worked in Japan for over a decade. Saoirse identifies very strongly with Ireland, and is versed in its long history as a site of colonization and resistance. This has shaped the way she has positioned herself, and has been positioned, throughout her life. Saoirse’s knowledge of, and interest in, ‘the world beyond her own’ was shaped by individuals claiming Irish ancestry: ‘there’s constant travel back and forth, and exchange. There’s strong awareness of and interest in the world beyond Ireland.’

As a university student in Ireland, Saoirse applied for and received a scholarship to study language arts and reading at the master’s level in California, USA. California intrigued Saoirse: ‘I didn’t expect the cultural enrichment that I had there, as it was another country where English was used.’ She was surprised by ‘the confidence people had, and the willingness with which people accepted compliments, and their general way of being.’ In Ireland, Saoirse had always been intimidated by people from other places, ‘because they seemed so confident and full of life and energy, and I didn’t know what kinds of things they liked to talk about and what kind of jokes did they like.’ This all changed in California. During this time, Saoirse met and eventually married her husband, who was studying ELT in the same
school. After graduation, Saoirse taught in a Catholic school in California. Additionally, she became a US citizen. Regarding this, Saoirse notes that ‘I introduce myself as Irish, but when it comes time to do the paperwork, I show the American passport.’

A few years later, Saoirse and her husband contemplated working overseas. Saoirse’s husband had previously received a job offer in Japan, and had always been interested in going, and Saoirse heartily agreed. They thus applied for, and received, jobs at a language school in western Japan. Saoirse’s shift to ELT involved her (perceived) capitalization upon idealized nativeness, as she interpreted that the school was ‘looking for a white native speaker with a heartbeat.’ Saoirse wrestled with this:

Being perceived as a native English speaker to me was just categorizing me as just like a member of monolithic group of native English speakers, from any other quote-unquote English speaking country. But we Irish have our own national language, which we feel very strongly about which was replaced by English. So I have a certain resentment towards English because of that.

This first job ‘was a toehold’ for locating university-level work. Saoirse soon obtained a position at a university in western Japan. During the interview, Saoirse introduced herself as Irish, but utilized her American passport when completing paperwork. In doing so, she ‘got the sense they struggled with the fluidity of identity boundaries.’ In the university, ‘NEST’ faculty members were kept largely separate from their Japanese counterparts, save for interaction with a female Japanese supervisor. This was true socially as well. Additionally, when Saoirse was targeted by a male Japanese stalker outside the university, it was her (exclusively) male, international colleagues who rallied around her, offering to walk her home.

Saoirse had her first encounter with gender and Japaneseness-related border patrolling at this university. In her department, a female Japanese student ‘failed a female Canadian teacher’s class because she had plagiarized her report.’ According to Saoirse, ‘this supervisor came down on the teacher … saying that “you’re absolutist and you’re western and you’re intolerant and you’re harsh, and you don’t understand Japanese culture,” and on and on.’ Following the event, the professor:

put articles in my box about westerners, and how they perceive things in terms of absolutes, and they’re universalistic, but Japanese, because of the more soft, moist, humid climate in which they grew up, are much more tolerant, and malleable in their approach … [laughs]. (Saoirse)

Saoirse felt ‘very much othered as an evil westerner … too strict to harsh, not enough empathy that Japanese have.’ Saoirse received a number of articles ‘that were highlighted, with my name on them, and with notes saying “read this so you can understand Japanese culture.”’ Saoirse felt she was being prompted to pass all students, ‘but that's not fair to the students who actually DO meet the expectations. So that's a frustration for me as well, in terms of agency. But I held and hold my ground.’

Saoirse was later offered a limited-term associate professorship in eastern Japan. There, she discovered that the full-time ‘NESTs,’ largely on contracts, were ‘segregated completely’ away from the Japanese teachers, small number of tenured ‘NESTs,’ and part-time faculty. Saoirse observed that ‘we (NESTs) were in a lower category. We were absolutely marginalized … we didn’t have anything to offer.’ In the workplace:

token meetings were held around twice a month. These meetings were a complete waste of time, because it was only the internationals. It was 10 of us, plus two (supervising) Japanese professors and an international. They were there to preside … There was complete disengagement. (Saoirse)
The international in question, Saoirse believed, ‘internalized the Japanese power structure,’ contributing to the separation of Japanese and international faculty, and to the marginalization of individuals located within the latter category. Saoirse felt ‘the segregation was SO BAD, that there were people would meet me in the halls and just look the other way.’ Interestingly, however, it was the full-time international who prompted Saoirse to pursue a doctorate and professional activities, citing increased job security.

Saoirse found her identity as female and Irish directly attacked by many of her male ‘NEST’ colleagues. On one occasion, Saoirse’s ‘Irish identity’ was challenged by her co-workers: ‘the term “British Isles” was used, which is a real affront to Irish people, and I said “well, actually Irish people don’t use that term,” and the blowback was really strong and really aggressive, and profanity was used.’ From Saoirse’s perspective:

their worldview was that this is a label that the international community has placed upon you. You should accept that, and if you don’t accept that, there’s something wrong with you. And the comments were passed around that ‘she doesn’t get it.’

Saoirse’s response was strong:

I said, ‘Look, every single Irish person, almost without exception, that hears that term, bristles. They bristle because we spent over 400 years trying to escape from colonialism, and we have a right to determine our own identity and who we are. We’re not British. We have a different language, we have a different culture, we have different traditions, we have different history.’

Additionally, Saoirse felt that her willingness to speak out to a portion of her ‘NEST’ colleagues led to resistance from some of these individuals: ‘western – White western men, I feel I’m invading their space in Japan. I’m invading their space because I’m here, I have opinions, I’m not necessarily going to agree with everything they say.’ On one occasion, when discussing the Japanese women’s national football team mascot, ‘nadeshiko’ (mentioned earlier by Hikari) with a male Australian colleague who researched gender, another co-worker injected ‘you live in Japan … You don’t have any right to criticize Japanese culture; it’s not your culture,’ which Saoirse took as a defense of essentialized femininity in Japan, and as an affront to her own identity. This took a toll on Saoirse: ‘The number of times I’ve been jumped on by male colleagues – it just made me withdraw.’ Saoirse notes that, ironically, these same teachers positioning themselves and positioned within the ‘idealized native speaker’ category work hard to sell themselves as embodying an identity, and knowledge, skills, and experiences that extended beyond the essentialized bounds of idealized nativeness, so that students, colleagues, and administrators would know that they were ‘much more valuable, unique, and intelligent than people think.’

Saoirse has felt that her Irishness and identity as ‘a speaker of a global English’ is not understood, as ‘there is no concept of the Irish persona.’ Both in Japan and ELT therein, Saoirse feels positioned within the category of ‘British English speaker,’ to which she takes affront: ‘It’s monolithic, it’s associated with the British empire, privilege, colonialism, British English … Do they say this in Britain … isn’t that British English? Well, I don’t know – ask someone who’s British.’ In terms of ‘femaleness,’ Saoirse feels that ‘Japanese perceive idealized native speaker men as being strong and powerful, and that’s what it means to be a man, but a woman is expected to be more … deferential.’ This, she believes, contributes to reinforcement of the bounds of who she can and/or should be, personally–professionally, in Japan.

Saoirse’s personal–professional lived experiences, and entry into a distance doctoral program in education, gave shape to her critically oriented view of her own positionality and of ‘nativeness’ and community membership. This prompted her to share her story at a major
international ELT conference, held in Indonesia. After her presentation, ‘(an) Indonesian guy in the audience said, “You’re privileged, you’re white, you have advantages that we don’t have; we feel inferior to you.” Saoirse felt ‘he was speaking my language, because as an Irish person, we feel inferior to everybody.’ In response, she noted that the individual’s ‘binary approach’ to talking to her about her experiences with privilege–marginalization neglected her identity and experience:

I explained that within the English-speaking world, we have been the inferior ones, and I gave him the reasons, and I told him about how in the 1840’s, we lost half our population to a famine. That has enormous consequences on the national psyche of a country. It’s why we lost our language – it was the death knell of the language – after that the Irish language became associated with poverty, and oppression, and famine, and war and the English language is what you need to succeed and advance, and therein lies the inferiority.

This is a tension that Saoirse has lived with as an ELT professional.

As she was on a limited-term contract, Saoirse and her husband pursued employment opportunities elsewhere in Japan. Saoirse opted for a full-time, tenured associate professorship in a university English department. She has been there for a year. In applying, Saoirse was clear about who she ‘was,’ identity wise, and was forthcoming about the ‘limits’ of her Japanese language ability. Upon arrival, she quickly ascertained that the department has been designed for two categorical types of full-time, tenured or tenure-track professors: Japanese ‘NNESTs’ (23 individuals), and non-native Japanese-speaking, white, western ‘NESTs’ (her and one other individual). Japanese was the dominant professional language of this new context, beyond the classroom. This obstacle, Saoirse believed, resulted in her being ‘deliberately excluded from committee meetings and from faculty meetings.’ The use of Japanese, she feels, is meant to ‘keep me out of the loop, to keep me in my place. I could be wrong, but that is how I am interpreting it; internalizing it …’ When asked to reflect upon the potential value Japanese use might hold, Saoirse noted she believed that ‘If you struggle with the language, it shows you’re making an effort, but if you speak fluently, you cross a threshold almost as if you have broken a code,’ in terms of the way categories of identity are constructed within ELT. She grounds her opinion in the lived experiences of close friends, for whom professional proficiency in Japanese failed to open doors. She emphasizes that she was invited into the department, and expected to find a more professionally welcoming community to which she could contribute. Saoirse laments that, professionally, ‘I feel like I’m a square peg in a round hole.’ She does note, however, that people are ‘friendly and speak English to me in the halls.’

Saoirse states that her motivation to speak Japanese beyond the professional realm has come from positive experiences in exercise classes. She notes that most internationals she knows have no motivation to learn the language, ‘because where’s the point of putting all this energy into studying the language, when nobody wants to befriend you. When you’ll never be considered part of the community. When you’re always going to be marginalized and peripheral …’ Saoirse feels that ‘I have broken through boundaries that most foreigners or internationals don’t break through, with the [exercise] people. They’ve been so welcoming and open. But I wonder if I were not an instructor, would I have the same experiences?’

Saoirse has also experienced ‘genderized border patrolling’ in her new workplace. At a farewell party for retiring colleagues, for instance, ‘all the other females were at the other end of the table. And I was the first to sit down, with a couple of people [males]. I perceived that as othering.’ Following subsequent experiences, Saoirse ascertained, ‘gender and its culture … I don’t fit “the mold.”’ With relation to committee work, faculty meetings, and dealing
with student-related issues, Saoirse has ‘the sense that everything is patriarchal around here, and that I am expected to say “yes” to everything, and not question anything.’ When problems arise related to students experiencing sexual harassment or pregnancy, Saoirse feels that ‘my female colleagues at some of our meetings, seem to be very deferential and very much in agreement with what’s being said. Almost to the extent that I want to say “Really?!”’

Saoirse’s anger also relates to the burden of administrative duties and committee work, often scheduled on her research days, on top of her full load of courses to teach, and that little is said openly about this issue. ‘Here,’ Saoirse asserts, ‘anybody who’s a little bit ahead in age or rank, well, “don’t argue.” I understand that, but I’m not willing to accept it nor change who I am.’ Saoirse continues to believe that:

I don't fit the mold of the Japanese female. I don't fit the mold of the native speaker I’m supposed to be, which is white American and maybe male. I don't fit the mold because I don't say ‘you can go ahead and take away my research day and forget my research …’ Well no, I’m pushing back.

Saoirse has indeed become increasingly outspoken in the department, troubling how she is positioned. This troubling, for her, interestingly involves affirming some of the discourses essentializing her identity: ‘I feel, as a foreign international, western woman, I have a bit more leeway … that I can plead ignorance. I have a lot more freedom in that area, more than Japanese women, and I use it to the full.’ She also utilizes professional writing to assert agency, choosing to write ‘a lot about the ethics of ELT, and what worldviews are being communicated, and what stereotypes are being perpetuated.’ In both cases, however, she laments not being able to communicate in Japanese with her professional community.

Saoirse sees the classroom as a key space in which she can and does problematize essentialized and idealized categories of identity, and the patrolling of their borders. Often, this involves her drawing upon her identity:

Whenever I come across something in a textbook that is uniquely American, I point it out. I’ll tell them, ‘oh, this may be very much American, but in Ireland we would say this, or spell it like this.’ I talk about the difference in pronunciation, and customs, and then I tell them about Gaelic football and hurling.

Saoirse designed one course to focus on Hiberno English. She notes that students received the course with eagerness and positivity: ‘Students would often say that it’s their favorite topic, because they’ve never been exposed to it.’ Saoirse has additionally placed items related to Ireland around her office and Irish proverbs on her door, which she feels ‘is a way to get people thinking about the world outside the Japan and the US.’

**Discussion and conclusion**

Hikari and Saoirse both apprehend the bounds of who individuals ‘are,’ ‘can,’ and/or ‘should’ be or become within ELT in Japan, as locally–globally constructed, context specific, and fluidly intertwined with the discursive construction, perpetuation, and patrolling of linguistic, cultural, ethnic, national, geographical, historical, political, academic, professional, and gendered borders of identity in Japanese society. These essentialized borders demarcate idealized Japaneseness, against which an essentialized and idealized Otherness is, in turn, juxtaposed. Likewise, their negotiation of positionality, including their troubling of dominant and critically oriented discourses of identity, fluidly and simultaneously occurs within the field of ELT and the community in which they live and work.
Hikari’s and Saoirse’s accounts of negotiating positionality include their fluid destabilization, affirmation, and reification of essentialized borders of being and becoming, which they and others have perceived as conflicted (Davies, 1991; Davies & Harré, 1990). For Hikari, for instance, this has related to strategically performing and challenging idealized Japaneseness and femaleness in Japan, in the interest of negotiating membership in Japanese society, completing her graduate program, and finding employment, while problematizing and challenging such constructions of femaleness, as well as idealized nativeness in English. Saoirse has problematized idealized nativeness in English, and constructions of femaleness in Japanese society and ELT therein, yet has benefitted, purposefully and otherwise, from positioning herself and being positioned within the contextualized, locally–globally constructed category of ‘idealized native speaker.’ As a result, as they both explicitly noted during the study, Hikari and Saoirse have experienced, and continue to experience, fluid privilege–marginalization.

Drawing upon their narratives, we assert that the study contributes to destabilizing the critically oriented, ‘normalized’ assumption in the field of ELT, that identity, experience, inequity, and ‘agency’ can and should be apprehended via categories embedded within binaries. We would contend that binaries, on the contrary, essentialize language learner, user, and instructor negotiations of being and becoming, thereby stripping them of discursive space for voice. This, in turn, may result in a failure, on the part of criticality, to attend to contextualized, local–global manifestations of inequity, and to the cultivation of teaching attentive to the complexity of identity and interaction in and beyond the classroom.

Finally, we contend that critical inquiry approaching identity, experience, inequity, and agency through a poststructural lens may potentially threaten participants’ and researchers’ professional trajectories, and even personal safety. During the research and writing process, we chose to conceal information shared by Hikari and Saoirse, as well as details that could potentially reveal more about our personal–professional relationships with them. Putting the health and welfare of participants first, regardless of what they share in co-constructed inquiry, we believe, will continue to be a lingering and important challenge facing researchers interested in doing similar work.

Notes

1. Both names are pseudonyms. 光 [hikari] means ‘light’ in Japanese, while Saoirse (pronounced Sair-sha) is a name of Irish origin signifying ‘liberty/freedom’ that became popular during Cogadh na Saoirse [Irish War of Independence] occurring between 1919 and 1921.
2. ‘We’ is employed to reveal our positionality and contributions to shaping the study as researchers.
3. Scholarship positioning itself, and/or positioned, as ‘poststructuralist’ is characterized by ontological and epistemological diversity, in its approach to ‘self.’ In this article, we draw on poststructural theory and scholarship that conceptualizes ‘self’ as discursively constructed, while not doing away with ‘self’ entirely.
4. In the interest of protecting Hikari and the identity of the student, elements of this quote and corresponding story cannot be included. We have used parentheses () to denote this.
5. Yamato nadeshiko is a term for essentialized, idealized, and traditional womanhood in Japan, where the individual is passive, subservient, beautiful, silent, and yet strong.
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