

# WHAT IS SUCCESS? RE-EXAMINING DEFINITION OF SUCCESS OF EAL LEARNERS THROUGH AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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## **Abstract**

*Autoethnography allows us to “go beyond simply looking at the artifacts or just the surface and to focus much more on the personal, the hidden, and the less obvious” (Lapidus, Kaveh, & Hirano, 2013, p. 34), and it is becoming more important to illustrate a constructive relationship between diverse professional communities, as English as a global language acquire local identities and local professional communities develop socially situated pedagogical practices (Canagarajah, 2012). This paper explores identity negotiation of the author, a transnational EAL student and a teacher through an autoethnography. Using concept of “audibility”, “agency”, “nobody”, and “somebody” (Kettle, 2005) and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), this paper unpacks the complexity of identity negotiation of an EAL student, and how it affected her teaching. It also provides an opportunity to rethink the definition of success.*

*Keywords:* identity, communities of practice, higher education, identity negotiation

## Introduction

“We teach who we are” (Palmer, 1997, p. 1), and especially transnational English teachers teach based on *currere* (Pinar, 1975), which is their understanding on language ideology and English curriculum informed by their learning experience in and outside of their home country (Gao, 2014). As English teaching and learning is becoming more and more diverse, it can be argued that it is worthwhile to explore transnational English teachers’ experience to better understand how their experience influence the way they teach. In this article, using autoethnography (e.g., Canagarajah, 2012), I will explore how I, a transnational English teacher, have negotiated identities as an English learner and teacher, and how it has shaped and reshaped my belief about teaching English focusing on concept of “audibility” (Kettle, 2005, p. 55).

## Method

In this paper, I will use autoethnography as a method to explore my experience as an English learner and teacher. Autoethnography is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010, p. 1). In the field of TESOL, it is becoming more important to illustrate a constructive relationship between diverse professional communities, as English as a global language acquires local identities and local professional communities, which develop socially situated pedagogical practices (Canagarajah, 2012). In understanding diverse professional communities, autoethnography allows us to “go beyond simply looking at the artifacts or just the surface and to focus much more on the personal, the hidden, and the less obvious” (Lapidus, Kaveh, & Hirano, 2013, p. 34). Using autoethnography as a method, I will offer insight into the complexity of an English learner and teacher’s identity negotiation.

## Conceptual framework

In her article *Agency as Discursive Practice: From “nobody” to “somebody” as an international student in Australia*, Kettle (2005) explores how international students adapt to new academic environments. She conducts interviews with a Thai international student named Woody focusing on how he experiences a graduate program in an Australian university. She examines how Woody engages and negotiates with the discourses in the new academic context. She finds that he goes through a process of fitting into this new academic community through “agentive actions” such as trying to understand the academic expectations and changing the way he participates in class. The author presents this adaption as a success for Woody. As a result of this success, Woody became to speak up in class, a change which Kettle (2005) describes as becoming “audible”. He felt like his existence did not matter in class, which made him feel like “nobody”, but by becoming audible, he felt like “somebody” who could express his opinions. There were many things that I could relate to, as the process that Woody went through, and the struggles he faced were very similar to what I underwent. In addition, the definition of success in the article overlapped the definition of success which I had strived for, and the article resonated

with me to a great extent. Therefore, in exploring my own experience as a learner and a teacher of English and examining my definition of success, I will use the concepts introduced in the article: “audibility”, “agency”, “nobody”, and “somebody”.

I will also use the notion of communities of practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) to explore my identity negotiation as an English learner. An important aspect of CoP is the interaction between more experienced members in the community, or experts, and less experienced members of the community, or novices. Therefore, in CoP, first, by observation, novices learn how members of the community interact as well as the common norms and skills needed in a particular community. Through interaction with more experienced members of the community, novice learn those norms and skills from those more experienced members and first, from the periphery, they start participating in the given community. Over time, they gradually move towards full participation. Lave and Wenger, (1991) refer to this socially situated process as *legitimate peripheral participation* (LPP). Some researchers have used CoP to examine EAL students’ identity negotiation in western universities, and they found that EAL students perceive English competence and oral participation as skills they need to acquire be a legitimate member of their academic discourse communities (e.g., Barnawi, 2009; Morita, 2004, 2009). As an EAL speaker myself, I will use the concept of CoP to explore my ongoing identity negotiation, and examine how it has had an impact on the way I teach as an English teacher.

### **How I Became Audible**

For 18 years of my life, I had always been a “successful kid” in the Japanese education system. Most of the classes were lecture oriented, and students were not expected to be critical, or be audible (Kettle, 2005). Although I was never really audible in class, I knew how to do well in the educational system I was brought up in. My grades were always good, I would actively participate in extracurricular activities, and would occasionally win awards inside and outside of school. Therefore, teachers, parents, as well as peers would see me as a “successful student”, and thus I had never compared myself to others, nor felt inferior to them. In other words, I was a legitimate member of the CoP of Japanese classrooms, and I had a positive identity as a successful learner.

However, participating in the Japan Super Science Fair (JSSF) in grade 12 became a life-changing experience for me. JSSF was the largest international science fair in Japan held at my high school, featuring 230 students from 19 countries. Not only was it a place for students from all over the world to showcase their science research, but it also offered a number of activities for students from different cultures to enjoy science together by working as a team, and exchanging ideas. Throughout the event, as a student buddy to the team from Hawaii, I enjoyed meeting people from different backgrounds.

Nonetheless, I also felt the low English proficiency of the Japanese people, including my own. I saw the significance of this during discussions and group activities. It seemed like the lack of English knowledge prohibited us from expressing our opinions, and I felt very frustrated. Watching students from overseas state their opinions confidently in front of everyone, I strongly

felt that we, as Japanese people, needed to be capable of expressing ourselves through English in order for us to be successful in a globalized world. In other words, I thought we had to be audible in order to succeed. This was when I decided to become an English teacher who could make some positive changes to English education in Japan. I thought in order to do that, I needed to gain international experience as well as native-like English skills and more advanced knowledge in English education.

In order to achieve my goal, I chose to go to a new, radical international university in Japan. Of all the students, half were Japanese, and half were international students from almost 100 different countries. Not only did the students come from all over the world to share their lives and study together, but also the faculty members were very diverse. The university offers an interesting bilingual educational system, with dual language education in Japanese and English. Upon entrance, students have a choice to either be enrolled in a Japanese or English stream as long as they meet the language requirement. Unlike most of the Japanese students, I chose the English stream. When I made this decision in grade 12, I had only one goal in mind: to acquire English skills that would be sufficient to get a master's degree in English education in an English speaking country. By English speaking country, I was thinking of a country in the inner circle where English is used as a first language or a mother tongue (Kachru, 1985). Because of my ambition, I did not hesitate to choose the English stream and challenge myself. Little did I know that most of the students would be native speakers of English, those who had received their education in international schools, or those with experience studying abroad or at least those with native-like English competence.

As soon as I started my academic career, I found myself having a hard time following the classes, reading and writing. In addition, it did not take me long to realize that I had a severe lack of confidence when it came to discussions and presentations. Now that I look back, I was always constrained by the idea of the imagined community (Norton, 2001) of the English stream students at the university. Because I was a Japanese student in the English stream, people would label me as someone who was as fluent in English as my Japanese, and had lived or studied outside Japan. In that unique academic context, it especially seemed like in Japanese students' minds, including my own, there was a strong dichotomy of native speakers and non-native speakers of English. Therefore, I felt extremely pressured to speak native-like English to meet people's expectations. This pressure made me not want to speak English when people knew that I was an English stream student. Looking back, it seems that I found native-like English competence as a skill needed in the imagined community, and because of my perceived lack of competence, I developed an identity as a deficient member in the imagined community.

On one hand, I was amazed by encountering different ways of teaching and learning in the new education system. I once took a course taught by a non-Japanese professor with a good friend of mine, who was an exchange student from the United States. I vividly remember how he always raised his hand during class and stated his opinions. There were other students like him who actively participated in class, and the class was very interactive. However, on the other hand, I felt oppressed by the imagined community, and thus I did not wish, nor try to be audible

in class. The feeling of “inaudible” and not being able to enter the imagined community gave me a sense of failure.

During my undergraduate career, I also studied abroad in Finland, and was immersed in a Western education system. In Finland, for the first time in my life, I was a minority in the community. Back in my university, it seemed as if there was no concept of minority or majority, simply because it was so diverse. However, in Finland, most of the students were from European countries, and sometimes, I was the only Asian student in class. My classmates were used to the western model of education, where students’ active participation was expected. In other words, they were used to an educational system where being audible was valued.

I remember feeling deficient compared to other students in most of the classes. Being a minority coupled with my anxiety over my English, I was always too scared to speak out. I would be sitting down in class looking at other students constantly raising their hands and stating their opinions as well as asking questions. It felt like my existence did not matter, and I felt in Kettle’s (2005) words, like “nobody”. As I look back on it now, I was still constrained by the notion of the imagined community of native speakers, and perhaps, the imagined community of Western people as well. The fact that I was still not able to be audible and failing to meet western academic expectation, not acquiring the skills needed to be a legitimate member of the CoP in other words, gave me a sense of being unsuccessful even more. Coupled with the past experience of being unsuccessful in my home university, I was strongly disappointed at myself. Again, I constructed a negative identity as an unsuccessful member of the CoP.

Soon after graduating from university, I became an English teacher in a private high school in Japan. Fortunately, the school that I worked at was very radical, and open to different teaching styles. My experiences at different universities, including Finland, significantly affected my teaching philosophy. I still had the same ambition as I had when I entered university, but after gaining international experience and becoming a more competent English speaker, I began to have another goal. I always had another goal in mind when I taught; I did not want my students to feel the way I felt; I did not want them to feel like nobody when they went out to the world, as many of them were considering studying abroad or going to university in different countries. I believed that in addition to facilitating the development of students’ English skills, developing their critical thinking skills as well as audibility would be necessary in order to reach the goal; that is, to have them acquire the skills needed in order to be legitimate members in the CoP of classrooms in Western universities.

Therefore, unlike the traditional Japanese teaching style, I made the class as interactive as I could, and gave students opportunities to think critically. I would assign them writing tasks and have them share their opinions instead of memorizing everything. I would also organize activities which required them to work in pairs or groups, and have them present on a topic in front of the class. I was doing these things in hopes that my students would become more accustomed to an educational style where students’ audibility was valued. I believe that although it was unconscious, I was preparing my students to be able to access certain CoP when they

might go outside of Japan. In other words, I was trying to prevent my students from being unsuccessful like I was.

Later in the year, I moved to Canada, to pursue my master's degree in education. Because of my past experiences, I understood the academic expectations in the western educational system, and really did not want to feel like a nobody and feel deficient again. Also, as someone who was teaching her students to be critical and audible, I felt the responsibility to acquire a new academic identity and prove to myself that I could be the person who I had always wanted to be. For the longest time, I hated myself for being restricted by the concept of imagined communities and not being able to use the language resources I had. Also, as I became more familiar with different theories and views regarding language learning and identity throughout the master's program, I felt more comfortable using my language resources. Therefore, I tried my best to be audible. Although it was still intimidating and uncomfortable to raise my hand and state my opinions, I pushed myself to do so. I actually felt good becoming audible, and finally felt like "somebody" rather than nobody. I finally felt like my existence in class mattered, and at last, I became successful. In other words, I could finally be recognized as a legitimate member of the CoP in my new academic discourse.

A few months after I finally became a successful student who could speak up in class, I encountered an article which made me reflect on my own experience and the definition of success. While reading *'Agency as Discursive Practice: From "nobody" to "somebody" as an international student in Australia'* (Kettle, 2005), I projected myself deeply into the Thai international student, Woody. I thought the study was such a great presentation of the difficulties international students sometimes face in western universities, how they overcome these challenges, and become successful in the new academic context, that is, to successfully socialize into the new academic discourse community. However, as I became more comfortable with being somebody who could express herself in class and became able to reflect on my improvement, I started questioning whether what I was seeing, and what Kettle (2005) presented as success, which is to adjust to the new academic culture, really was success. In Kettle and my old definition of success, success is an adaptation to a new academic context through agentic actions and becoming audible in class. In this view, it could be said that after a number of failures, I finally became successful when I started speaking up in class in Canada, that is, when I acquired the skill needed in the new CoP.

### Discussion

However, some questions arose for me. Just because I did not force myself to be audible in classrooms in my university and Finland, was I really unsuccessful? I may not have been able to speak up in class, but I still took other agentic actions to achieve my goals. For instance, while I was studying in Finland, I contacted a local Finnish school to visit and observed classes after taking a course about the Finnish education system. I learned that Finnish classrooms were open to anyone, meaning anyone could come in and see what was going on in the classroom any time they wanted. I found it interesting and really wanted to see it firsthand so I could learn more

about it. That is why I visited a local school in town and even got a chance to talk with students as well as teachers there. As I look back on the experience now, I can confidently say that it was a fruitful experience which broadened my perspective on education. Also, would I have been reproducing more “unsuccessful” learners if I did not teach my students in Kyoto to be critical and audible? Who determines success? What is success?

In this era of globalization, there will be more and more students and teachers seeking their education or career outside of their own countries. University is one of the institutions that has been affected by this trend of internationalization of institutions, and in fact, many universities are internationalizing. Through my experience, I have learned that unique ideas can often be created and work can be completed more efficiently through working with people from different cultures rather than working with people from the same culture. Therefore, I believe if we can create an environment where different cultures and values are understood and respected equally, not only international students, but also local students as well as universities will benefit. I argue that understanding different experiences of students could be more important than having one definition of success and trying to make students audible. In order for classrooms to become a place for creating unique values in a changing society, I believe that more people’s identities and experiences should be examined and understood. Also, I am convinced that examining what agentive actions are important in students’ learning are crucial for educators, especially in this changing society with an increasing diversity of ethnicities and languages in the classroom. I hope my autoethnography showcased the complex process of identity negotiation of an EAL student, and how the negotiation affected my teaching. In addition, through exploring perspectives and experience of a transnational student and a teacher, I hope that this article provided an opportunity to rethink the definition of success.

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