As we are conducting this interview, we recognize that we are at a complex and uncertain time as TESOL [Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages] educators and researchers. How would you describe the current state of the field and its impact on language teacher identities?

I have been in the field for at least three decades and it has been fascinating to see some of the changes that have taken place in the field. Possibly one of the most important changes is the recognition that we live in a multilingual but unequal world. While we all see that English is important, particularly for access to power, to institutions, and to an expanded range of opportunities, how do we acknowledge that many people who want to learn English also speak one or more other languages which are important to those people, and also a huge resource to the wider community? I see TESOL shifting and recognizing that.

Interestingly enough, my former student Asma Afreen wrote an article recently published in the *TESOL Quarterly* that addressed translation and translator identity (see Afreen, 2023). The article relates to the work that we are doing with digital storytelling and the Global Storybooks (n.d.) project, in which we translate stories from one language to another to provide free resources for multilingual communities. The article raised the question: why would TESOL be interested in...
translation? Asma made the point that we live in a multilingual world, and so we need to navigate between and among multiple languages and repertoires. There is a lot more hybridity in the field, and I think TESOL recognizes that. So, then, what is the impact on language teacher identities? What does it mean to be a teacher?

If teachers think that TESOL is only about learning English, then the teacher’s focus might be limited to encouraging only English in the classroom; but if teachers appreciate that they are teaching English within a multilingual world, they might acknowledge the different languages that are spoken in the class and examine the wider social context in which English is learnt.

That is one of the reasons why I am active in digital storytelling and the Global Storybooks project. Many teachers of English say: “I would love to acknowledge all the languages in the class, but I can only speak one or two languages.” We can now say to these teachers that there are, in fact, many freely available resources for multilingual classrooms and that students can actually toggle between English and many other languages as they learn to read, speak, and write English. So, even if teachers do not know or cannot speak some of the multiple languages in their classrooms, they can still acknowledge the diverse languages of their students and draw on these languages in creative and critical ways. Teachers can also give students the reassurance that although the students may struggle to articulate their ideas in English, they do have rich, exciting ideas that can be articulated in other languages.

In this way, we are shifting the identity of the teacher from being a strictly English teacher to being a teacher of English within a multilingual world. A related issue is the distinction between the teacher who is a “native speaker” of English and the teacher who is a “non-native speaker” of English. In the past, a non-native teacher of English might have felt less confident about teaching English, especially if teaching in a context where English is widely spoken, such as in the UK, the USA, Canada, and so forth. But now, if a teacher is teaching within a multilingual world, “non-native” teachers can embrace their multilingual identities, which provides for more powerful teacher identities.

Of course, connected to this issue are practices of translanguaging. While we have the concept of named languages in the wider field, we also recognize that there is much hybridity when it comes to the use of languages in a classroom. There is now a greater comfort level for teachers who might otherwise have thought: “English only in my classroom.” Now, teachers can use multiple languages to scaffold learning in ways that are empowering.

Huseyin: We know that your work on theorizing identities through your investment theory has made a significant impact on the field. It was especially helpful in understanding language learner and teacher identities. What do you see as past accomplishments the field made as a whole in terms of theorizing and advancing the research in language teacher identities?
Bonny: A very good question. The construct of investment is one that I developed as early as 1995 (see Norton, 2013; Norton Peirce, 1995), and have developed further with my former student Ron Darvin (Darvin and Norton, 2015, 2023). I was concerned that many teachers considered their students “unmotivated” if the students were not making progress in their classes, dropped out of their classes, or were resistant to learning. What I found in my research was that, in fact, many students are highly motivated, but they may not be *invested* in the language practices of a given classroom. In other words, there may be little connection between the language practices of the classroom and the students’ complex identities. There could be a number of reasons for the lack of investment—which I theorize as a sociological rather than psychological construct. It could be that the classroom has racist, homophobic, or gendered practices. In order to speak and take risks, students need to feel that they are valued as a speaker and a member of the classroom community. The construct of investment captures the view that identity is central to the right to speak. In my research, I have found that it is very difficult for learners to speak if they are positioned as a “broom,” for example. Many multilingual language learners will say: “I feel stupid when I try to speak English.” Of course, they are not stupid; they are struggling to articulate complex ideas in an unfamiliar language. This is why the focus of teaching should be on multilingual practices that validate students’ prior linguistic and cultural knowledge.

Many teachers who simply see students as motivated or unmotivated are conceptualizing students in binary terms. If we think of students as having complex identities, changing across time and space, and reproduced in social interaction, we conceive of students differently. So, I try to encourage teachers to think not only about whether students are motivated to learn but whether students are invested in the language practices of their classrooms. In this view, investment and identity are mutually constitutive. If students are not invested in the language practices of our classrooms, how can we, as teachers, modify our practices in such a way as to promote student investment?

What I have found in my research I can certainly share. I encourage teachers to shift the perspective of being an abstract “good teacher” to think about what it would mean to be “a good teacher for my students.” If, as a teacher, I start thinking “I want students to invest in the language practices of my classroom,” what do I need to know about the students? I want to understand the history that the students bring to the classroom. I want to understand their hopes for the future. I want to understand their lives outside the classroom. I want to understand what identity positions might be more powerful for them than simply the “English-language learner.” They could have the identity of the musician, the artist, the mother, the chef. So, how do I draw on those different identities to ensure that students feel valued in the class and have a more powerful position from which to speak? Under those conditions, what I am
doing is encouraging student investment in the language practices of my classroom. In this case, the student might be more comfortable, more active, and less likely to drop out of the class. Then, the result is that I feel happier and more productive as a teacher. We are looking at collaboration between the teacher and the student, with a view to enhanced language learning as well as more productive and joyful language teaching.

Jinna: I have seen your Global Storybooks project and how that gets immersed into students’ learning. I hear a lot about student and teacher empowerment from you and your identity theories. I am curious how you see the Global Storybooks project contributing to empowering both language learners and language teachers’ hybrid identities.

Bonny: Thank you for asking that, Jinna. I am very invested in the Global Storybooks project, which promotes and celebrates multilingualism. This is an extension of our earlier discussion about multilingualism and a recognition that while many TESOL teachers are very supportive of multilingualism, they often feel they do not have the resources to support multilingualism in their classrooms. What this project does is to provide such multilingual resources for the teacher, in the form of digital stories freely available in multiple languages, which can be read, listened to, downloaded, and transformed.

What is very important about these resources is that they are freely available. A lot of teachers in different parts of the world do not have the funds to buy expensive books, or perhaps such books are not even available in their communities or libraries. I worked with my former student Espen Stranger-Johannessen, who is now at the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, and Liam Doherty, who is now at the University of British Columbia (UBC), when we started this project over a decade ago (Norton et al., 2020). We are all committed to open access and have also had many volunteer students working on the project, all of whom are acknowledged on the site. Global Storybooks was inspired by the African Storybook initiative, and I was fortunate to be the research advisor of the African Storybook initiative since its inception in 2013. The initiative is led by the South African organization Saide [South African Institute for Distance Education], which provides free, beautifully illustrated digital stories for use in African communities and beyond (Norton and Welch, 2015).

What we did with our team at UBC was to translate 40 of those open-access stories for a wider global audience, making them available on a user-friendly interactive digital portal. We also developed software that would enable users to read parallel versions of the same story in multiple new languages, and we provided audio for many of these languages. While the initial project focused on children and families, it has been expanded with the inclusion of other sites which use the same digital platform. These include LIDA (Learning Inclusion in a Digital Age, n.d.), which focuses on youth and adults, and the Indigenous Storybooks project, with many Indigenous languages. Global
Storybooks now has stories available for children, youth, and adults in over 150 languages. We have widely spoken languages such as Arabic, English, French, German, Mandarin, Spanish, and Swahili. But we also have many languages and repertoires that are not as widely known, such as Nigerian Pidgin, Haitian Creole, and many Indigenous languages.

In the last year alone, 2023, we had nearly 200,000 visitors to our Global Storybooks sites. This is great for language teachers and language learners, but it is also exciting for communities because parents and librarians can use these resources as well. With our research, we have found that these stories can build bridges between schools and communities. When some children go off to school, they feel that nobody knows their language. Now that the teacher can utilize the language in a classroom, the child feels, “Oh my goodness! I am struggling with English, but look, I can read Arabic. Let me show you what I can do with Arabic.” Then the students go home, and they read these stories to their parents, and then parents feel that they can actually connect with the school. This has implications for teacher identity. For teachers who see themselves not only as classroom teachers but also as members of the community, they can reach out to the community and connect with parents and librarians by sharing resources that are freely available.

I can add that for research purposes, this is also exciting. When researchers go to a school, the researcher says: “Would you mind if I observe your classroom? Would you mind if I participate?” Administrators and teachers are often generous, but it is also great for the researcher to say, “Would you be interested in this resource, which is freely available? It can be shared with your teachers, your students, and the community.” So, it provides another whole angle to the research project, and there is much more of a collaborative relationship between the researchers, the teachers, and the students. I remember Uju Anya of Carnegie Melon University once spoke to me about some research she was doing in Washington, DC. I said: “Why not bring this site to your kids in Washington, DC?” That is why we now have a site called Storybooks Washington, DC.

I do appreciate that technology takes some funding, as users need access to cellphones or laptops. But in research that I have done in the African context, where there are fewer resources, what I find is that even in the most remote communities, there will be at least one cellphone, and people will share that phone. The world is changing so that even in poorly resourced communities, people understand that technology is very important. Technology opens up possibilities for people and provides different identity positions for teachers as well as students. We have found that in the African context, for example, female teachers would say, “If I have a computer in front of me, I feel empowered” (Stranger-Johannessen and Norton, 2017).
Jinna: So fascinating to hear about the impact of that project in particular. Technology has changed a lot of things, including language teaching, for sure. I can see when you were talking about the Global Storybooks project that there are a lot of connections to make with your investment theory and how that empowers learners’ and language teachers’ identities. But for the general audience, I have heard from a lot of teachers, TESOL teachers in the field, saying language teacher identity research, when they go to conferences and listen to it, is very impractical for their day-to-day teaching practices. They ask, can I get some more practical research instead of language teacher identity research? So, I am curious what you think are the implications and what we can give to practicing teachers when we talk about your investment theory and language teacher identities.

Bonny: This is an important question. In Canada, we had a remarkable scholar called Mary Ashworth, who was one of the leaders of the TESOL field about 40 years ago. She always said: “There is nothing as practical as a good theory.” Perhaps I could explain that. Just this morning (February 8, 2023), we had a virtual international seminar on the Global Storybooks project based at King’s College London, UK. The organizer, Christina Richardson, invited people from different parts of the world to participate in the seminar. One of the participants was a teacher called Laura Rodriguez from Argentina, who was sharing how she used a story called “Hair,” which originated from the African Storybook, in one of her language classes. Spanish is the main language in Argentina, but Laura was teaching students English, and the students were able to toggle between Spanish and English while reading “Hair.” Laura said she had a fascinating class talking about hair, hairstyles, and identity. Many people are not very comfortable with their hair. Some people do not like the fact their hair is curly; they want it straight. Some people have it straight; they want it curly. Laura and her students found that hair has implications for identity, power, and politics.

Just thinking of what was happening today in that virtual seminar, it is clear that free multilingual resources helped to promote student investment in the language practices of Laura’s classroom. Laura used the resources innovatively and critically, adapting them to her particular context. Her students were very excited to read the stories, and also to quickly toggle back to Spanish if they did not understand the parallel story in English. What Laura helped to create was an active, multilingual, translingual classroom.

Jinna: I also really like the fact that there is a lot of cultural content in the Global Storybooks project with a lot of correlation with politics and social ideologies.

Bonny: Even if a story is about a culture that students are unfamiliar with, the use of the story has two distinct advantages. One, students learn about another culture, but also, students reflect on their own cultures. Teachers often say
that stories are about windows and mirrors—a window through which students can see a wider world, but also a mirror that reflects students’ own experiences and beliefs. So, it is wonderful that students can look at other cultural practices but also reflect on what is happening in their own communities, whether in Argentina, Germany, Zimbabwe, or Australia. In the multilingual classroom, there are students from all parts of the world. Many teachers want to acknowledge that their classroom is often a micro-cosm of the world and that we learn not only about diverse people’s languages but also about their cultural practices. We are all enriched as a result of this learning.

Jinna: I see that your Global Storybooks project has given tremendous resources to teachers. I am curious about what kind of advice you would give to future generations to close the gap between research and practice in the field of TESOL moving forward.

Bonny: This is an issue I have addressed in a recent article with Peter De Costa, the current co-editor of TESOL Quarterly, who is also very interested in language, identity, and research (Norton and De Costa, 2018). When scholars want to publish in the TESOL Quarterly, one of the questions that reviewers have to answer is, “Is there a section on practice? Does the paper make appropriate links between theory, research, and practice?” So, there is recognition that research and practice should be connected. Research is often grounded in practice; it arises because teachers are struggling to understand their practices, their classrooms, and their communities.

My research is always driven by the need to better understand practice. When I hear teachers say that the students are not motivated in their classrooms, my question is, I wonder why? When I interview these same students, I realize that they are not unmotivated; there is something more complex going on. This is what led me to develop the construct of investment; my research enabled me to dig deeper to understand the language practices of diverse classrooms. So, theoretical analysis does arise from practical problems.

Another practical problem is the availability of multilingual resources. Teachers will say: “I do not have resources. I know that my students are multilingual, but what can I do?” We can then share our open access digital resources, developed specifically to address the lack of resources. And we can then do research with these resources to see whether the resources have had any impact and how they can be improved (Doherty et al., 2022; Stranger-Johannessen and Norton, 2017; Zaidi et al., 2022).

I think it is very important that research addresses practical problems, and we can be creative and critical in addressing those problems. What you see in these stories, for example, is a lot of diversity. There are characters of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. If you look at the LIDA stories, you will also see people from different religious backgrounds, which makes students feel a lot more comfortable. Because Global Storybooks is a very practical project that is freely available, we
hope to help answer the question “What can I do in my classes? I have got kids from 15 different countries. What do I do?” I can say, check it out. Are those languages available on the site? How do you use those languages? How do you use those stories? Develop new stories. On Storybooks Canada (n.d.), we have PDFs of all the stories. The way that those PDFs can be downloaded enables students to write their own stories. How great is that? If the students are very young, they can make their own illustrations. Or students can create a different ending to that story. So, there are multiple ways in which teachers can be both creative and critical.

We are limited only by our imaginations. My doctoral student Monica Shank Lauwo, who is a native speaker of English but also fluent in Swahili, was giving a talk to my doctoral seminar at UBC last week. The students asked her how she learnt Swahili. She said that she spent quite a bit of time in Tanzania, speaking to people and using an old-fashioned grammar book as a reference. That 20-year-old grammar book is still useful if it is used creatively and critically.

We need to promote teacher agency because teachers come with huge experience that is highly relevant in teaching. Teachers use their imaginations. They work with the interests and investments of the students, and, together, they create materials and conversations that enhance language learning. As language teacher educators, how do we encourage language teachers to draw on the wide range of their experience, value it, and see it is relevant? I am very optimistic because I have seen teachers in action, and it always amazes me what teachers can do (Shank Lauwo and Norton, 2023).

Jinna: That is for sure. I feel like your answer to my previous question partially answered this, but just to reiterate: how do you envision the research methodology, theorization, and practice in TESOL moving forward?

Bonny: What I find in my experience is fascinating. I see what gets published in print, and then I often get a much more nuanced perspective when I hear scholars talk more informally. I recently spoke to a leading scholar of translanguaging, who seems in publications to have a very fixed idea of what translanguaging is. When I spoke informally to that scholar, however, I heard a lot more nuance and flexibility. We must be aware that what was perhaps a central issue five years ago might be shifting and changing as we move forward. We should always be open to flexibility, to changing circumstances, and to nuance in the work that we do. That is why I enjoy reading blogs. I enjoy reading up-to-date conversations because I often find in those conversations a much more flexible attitude and approach to research, theory, and practice. Once an idea gets printed, it becomes more static. I would like to see expanded conversations through our blogs, our websites, our conferences, and our newsletters.

In terms of where the field is going theoretically, I think we will see a continuation of the focus on multilingualism. But while we embrace
plurilingualism and translanguaging, there is also a recognition that we have to provide an expanded range of opportunities for language learners, particularly for those in poorly resourced communities. Hilary Janks talks about the access paradox, and, by that, she means, on the one hand, we want to acknowledge the multiple languages and repertoires that students bring to a classroom, but we also want to ensure that students have access to languages of power and to a wider range of opportunities for their future (Janks, 2010).

We are addressing this issue right now at UBC. We have many students applying for admission to the PhD program, where English is the language of instruction. Students are required to show their results from IELTS [International English Language Testing System] tests, TOEFL [Test of English as a Foreign Language] tests, or other tests. The reality is that many students and language learners have to navigate issues of assessment in their lives. So, while we want to encourage and recognize the multiplicity of languages and repertoires that students have, we also need to recognize that many students have to navigate the assessment practices that are integral to our field.

In 1992 I wrote an article in TESOL Quarterly on demystifying the TOEFL reading test. By demystifying assessment practices, both teachers and students are learning about institutional structures of power. At the same time, however, they are also developing creative strategies for teaching and learning languages. So, the field works with both named languages as well as repertoires; the two are not mutually exclusive (Doherty et al., 2022).

Jinna: Thinking about access policy altogether, I find it very challenging sometimes to make teachers invest in changing the access policies for English-language learners. There is an assessment challenge. There are other things. In New York State right now, there are a lot of refugee students who do not have a place to live and continue their education. Not all teachers are motivated or invested enough to advocate for their students. How can we bridge that gap and apply that same idea of investment theory to teachers, as well?

Bonny: Yes, teachers also need to be invested in the language practices of their classrooms by reframing what it means to be a good teacher (De Costa and Norton, 2017). I think that very often in our field, teachers are very concerned about their students, their futures, and their histories. At the same time, teachers are often exhausted; they have huge loads; and they have families, too. They have issues they need to deal with, and they have complex identities. For example, if you look at the LGBTQ community, how do gay and lesbian teachers manage their identities in the classroom? Or you could have an African American teacher who is a native speaker of English but feels she does not have the legitimacy of a white teacher who may, in fact, be a non-native speaker of English. So, teachers also have complex identities and may struggle to claim legitimacy. It is not just about the language teachers speak; we
are looking at issues of race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and religion, for example. If teachers can find other teachers who share their concerns and their interests, they will have a greater impact and a more powerful voice.

Teachers often work together to create coalitions, which can certainly change a profession. I remember when I edited a 1997 special issue of the *TESOL Quarterly* on identity, there was a discussion on native- and non-native-speaking teachers. Now, that conversation has really advanced, and there is greater acknowledgment of the multilingual nature of the teaching profession. We see shifts in other areas as well, such as sexual orientation, and issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and religion (Norton and De Costa, 2018).

**Jinna:** I agree. It helps when teachers have a group and a community where they feel like they belong and can collaborate together. That makes a big difference in what they are more invested in doing for their profession and then for their students.

**Bonny:** The issues around intersectionality are also going to be important, moving forward. There is recognition of the relationship between these issues, and the intersectionality, for example, of race and social class. But then you can be a privileged white male who is also gay. Both teachers and students have these multiple identities. We are also going to see a lot more work in technology. Ron Darvin’s work is very important in this regard, and he locates this work in debates on power, identity, and investment. But while technology will continue to be very important, we know that technology can create huge anxiety for people, depending on how it is used. How can we harness technology in ways that can be productive and empowering? An exciting challenge for the future of the field!

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