

# TEACHER PROFILES

## When Your Confidence is Kidnapped: The Journey from Insecure Immigrant to Self-Assured ESL Teacher and Advocate

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*Summary: This teacher profile describes the social and psychological journey of a young Mexican immigrant who overcomes her fears to build a life for herself. The essay documents her emerging identity as an NNEST ESL teacher who, with increasing self-confidence, becomes an advocate for her students and fellow immigrants.*

*Keywords: social and psychological journey, Mexican immigrant, NNEST ESL teacher, advocate*

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In 2002, every day brought reports of more *express kidnappings* in Mexico City, but I never thought it would happen to me. Then, suddenly, a pistol was pointed at me, and my life changed forever. In seconds, my freedom was taken away, and emotions collided: fear, terror, anxiety, submissiveness, denial. They took money, jewelry, and clothing. Of greater importance, they robbed my self-confidence. I was 26 years old.

After the kidnapping, I was afraid of my surroundings, afraid of meeting new people, and afraid of the dark. After that episode, I went into self-exile to the United States, where movies depicted heroes saving victims. Seeking safety, I fled to the land of dreams. Yet, unlike previous visits, I was now struggling to build a stable and dignified life. When crossing the customs checkpoint, I joined those who leave part of themselves behind. Although I was privileged to have transportation choices other than risking my life by crossing the desert or the Rio Grande, leaving my home was painful. I went north with a wet face from many tears and no assurances for what the future would bring.

Years later, I have come to realize that the United States is filled with many people with different reasons and stories for leaving their countries. Now, as an English as a Second Language teacher, I see myself in my English learners and empathize with their immigration stories and their acculturation struggles. Just like my students, I needed to adapt to a new culture without losing my own, and learn a new language, one that I used to sing without understanding the lyrics. While growing up in Mexico, I viewed the US mostly through a Hollywood camera—as a place where good triumphs over evil. My new American city, Birmingham, Alabama, with its historical struggle for civil rights and social justice, seemed like a real-life version of my

childhood perspective. However, I felt unwelcome when I saw the angry expressions of some people who heard me speak Spanish, so I stopped speaking Spanish for a long time. Later, I learned that my ELs also avoided speaking their home languages after experiencing similar stigma, which often limited their ability to use their home language for extended, meaningful communication, especially with family.

I vividly remember when I could only speak a few words in English. That was a lonely period in my life, and I was desperately homesick for the beautiful Mexico where I was born. I was also afraid of being reborn in the U.S. because I did not want to lose my identity. In this new life, I did not always know who I was. This was my first time seeing and talking to people who were not Mexican. For months I depended on my then-husband, who was not a Spanish speaker, to order food for me, drive for me, and speak for me. Experiencing a silent period in the beginning kept me living in isolation because I did not have a voice in English to express my feelings and thoughts with others. Learning survival vocabulary helped me connect with people in my new community, and liberated me from my lonely life and oppressive marriage. In this unfamiliar language, I learned to make new friends from many cultures. Later, as I became more proficient, I wanted to speak English like a native because without my former life and friends in Mexico, I thought perfect pronunciation would help me fit in and make new friends. Once I broke through my silent period, I quickly learned conversational English, but I struggled for a long time to express myself in formal situations, just like my ELs.

After learning more English and becoming somewhat settled in my adopted city, I decided to seek certification

in Spanish. While earning my BA and MA, I worked as a bilingual paraprofessional and met numerous mini versions of myself. Though from different backgrounds, these boys and girls shared similar challenges—learning English and progressing academically. I wanted to help them by becoming an ESL teacher, but I lacked confidence because of my obsession to speak English “perfectly”. Luckily, two people believed in me. An ESL teacher and a school administrator urged me to teach ESL, but I hesitated. With continual encouragement, they did finally convince me. For me and my ELs, I pursued an Educational Specialist degree (EdS) in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

One of my favorite graduate courses was the pedagogical phonology course because it helped me set reasonable expectations for my own English pronunciation by focusing on intelligibility rather than accent reduction, and on communication rather than perfect pronunciation (Munro, 2008; Spezzini et al., 2018). In other courses, I learned about the native speaker myth. Not only are native speakers idealized—there is no “perfect” way to speak a language—but being a native-speaker does not inherently make them better language teachers. In fact, non-native speakers offer unique perspectives and language expertise (Reis, 2012). Now, when I meet immigrant ELs with similar fears and misconceptions about language that hold them back from becoming ESL teachers, I tell them how valuable their experiences are, and how important it is to become a role model for other English learners.

As an ESL teacher, I discipline myself to build mutual trust

with leaders, teachers, and staff to strengthen school-wide support for my program. While interacting with school colleagues, I hear myths about English learners and misguided stereotypes, especially about Mexicans. For example, some colleagues believe that all Spanish-speaking children are “illegal immigrants” from Mexico. I find ways to describe the rich diversity within Mexico, and the fact that our students come from several different Latin American countries. Another myth teachers believe is that ESL parents do not attend school meetings because they do not care about their children’s education. With patience and positivity, I work with my colleagues, one by one, to discredit these myths by slipping into the conversation facts about geography, demographics, history, and traditions of Mexico and other Latin American countries. I also explain the academic and social-emotional benefits of creating a welcoming environment for all (Allen, 2007), and the many difficulties immigrant families encounter when getting established in a new country.

My ESL graduate courses and my subsequent teaching have helped me regain the confidence that the kidnapping robbed. Instead of focusing on my fears or my imperfect pronunciation, I openly advocate for my students and their families. I encourage my fellow immigrants to become ESL teachers, and I am learning new ways to share my own story in hopes of becoming another example of the many immigrant ELs who push out of their comfort zones to reach for new goals. The time has come for all of us—as immigrants and non-immigrants alike—to set aside our fears and become a voice for English learners and their families.

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