

From Classroom to Creator: Auto-ethnographic Reflections on Teacher Identity and Symbolic Capital in Digital Learning Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how digital platforms reshape teacher identity and professional legitimacy through autoethnography. Drawing from the author's transition from a traditional English-language classroom to YouTube-based instruction, the study examines how algorithmic milestones, learner engagement, and affective labour intersect to produce new forms of symbolic capital. Using theoretical frameworks of Ellis and Bochner (2000) on auto-ethnography, Avidov-Ungar and Forkosh-Baruch (2018) on teacher identity, and Bourdieu (1986) on symbolic capital, the paper argues that online teaching demands both pedagogical adaptation and emotional resilience. The findings reveal that legitimacy in digital pedagogy is no longer confined to institutional hierarchies but increasingly derives from recognition within participatory communities.

KEYWORDS: Auto-ethnography; Teacher identity; Digital pedagogy; Symbolic capital; YouTube education

INTRODUCTION

English teaching in India has long prioritized grammar, accuracy, and examination writing, leaving pronunciation and spoken fluency in the background. With affordable internet and smartphones in recent years, a new learning ecology has emerged in which students increasingly rely on YouTube for language guidance. In this environment, the author began producing short pronunciation videos to address students' difficulties with accent and stress. What began as a small intervention gradually evolved into a transformative professional journey.

Although classrooms continue to play a central role in language education, they are no longer the only spaces where learning takes place. Students now move seamlessly between formal instruction and digital platforms, often turning to YouTube for explanations, demonstrations, and revision at their own pace. Unlike conventional classrooms, these platforms allow learners to revisit lessons repeatedly, interact with creators through comments, and choose content that addresses their immediate learning needs. This gradual shift has expanded the boundaries of English-language teaching, creating

new opportunities for educators to engage with learners beyond institutional settings.

The digital turn has blurred boundaries between formal instruction and public performance. Subscriber milestones (250, 500, 750, and 1,000) became symbols of belonging and recognition rather than mere statistics. Each stage marked a subtle shift in self-perception, confirming that the authority of teaching was no longer tied exclusively to institutions but also to online visibility.

Auto-ethnography provides a way to study such transformation from within lived experience. It allows educators to connect personal reflection with broader cultural and theoretical debates about how teachers adapt to digital environments. Despite the growing body of research on digital pedagogy, relatively few studies have examined how educators themselves experience the transition from traditional classrooms to creator-driven learning environments. Much of the existing literature focuses on learners, technological affordances, or instructional outcomes, while teachers' lived experiences navigating visibility, recognition, and identity on digital platforms remain underexplored. By foregrounding these experiences,

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the present study contributes to a deeper understanding of how teaching is being redefined in the age of participatory media.

This study explores how the author's engagement with YouTube reshaped professional identity, pedagogical practice, and emotional life, illustrating how teaching is being redefined in the creator economy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Auto-ethnography and Reflective Practice

Auto-ethnography combines autobiography and ethnography, legitimising personal experience as a source of scholarly knowledge (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In language-education research, it enables teachers to analyse their professional lives within social and institutional contexts (Uştuk, 2025). Chang (2008) describes it as both cultural critique and self-study, an approach that reveals how broader structures shape individual agency.

By using this method, the author interprets milestones, analytics, and emotions not as isolated anecdotes but as data that illuminate the changing relationship between pedagogy and platform culture. Auto-ethnography also fosters reflexivity, encouraging teachers to situate their evolving identities within the digital and emotional landscapes of their practice.

In recent years, auto-ethnography has gained increasing acceptance in educational research because it captures aspects of teaching that often remain invisible in conventional empirical studies. Experiences such as uncertainty, professional growth, emotional investment, and changing perceptions of identity are difficult to quantify but profoundly influence pedagogical practice. By treating these lived experiences as legitimate sources of inquiry, auto-ethnography offers nuanced insights into the evolving realities of teachers working in rapidly changing educational environments.

Pronunciation Pedagogy and Neglect in ELT

Kelly's early metaphor of pronunciation as the "Cinderella of language teaching" (cited in Gilakjani, 2016) still resonates. Research consistently shows that teachers feel less confident teaching pronunciation than grammar or vocabulary (Derwing & Munro, 2015). Gilakjani (2016) attributes this to limited training, inadequate materials, and fear of perpetuating non-native models. For Indian learners, mother-tongue interference and limited exposure to natural speech further complicate learning.

Digital media offer alternative routes for pronunciation practice. Learners can access varied models, visual

aids, and immediate repetition opportunities. However, few studies explore how teachers adapt their pedagogy to these new formats or how platform dynamics influence instructional choices.

The growing popularity of pronunciation-focused content on digital platforms also reflects a shift in learners' priorities. While examination-oriented classrooms often emphasise reading and writing, many learners seek online resources to improve intelligibility, confidence, and spoken interaction in academic and professional contexts. This demand has encouraged teachers to adopt more accessible and learner-centred approaches to pronunciation instruction, presenting concepts through brief demonstrations, visual cues, and authentic examples. Consequently, digital platforms have emerged not merely as supplementary learning spaces but as environments where pronunciation receives sustained attention that is often difficult to achieve within the time constraints of formal classrooms.

Microlearning and Digital Affordances

Microlearning, the practice of delivering content in small, focused segments, aligns with cognitive-load theory and attention-economy realities (Mayer, 2009). On YouTube, micro-lessons exploit visual and auditory channels to reinforce memory through quick, repeatable exposure. Kusuma, Mardiana, and Saifulloh (2023) demonstrated that YouTube-based pronunciation tasks improve listening and speaking performance by combining visual cues with auditory modelling.

For the author, the YouTube Shorts format, limited to one minute, forced pedagogical clarity. Each video had to focus on a single sound, rule, or contrast, encouraging precision and creativity. The brevity that once appeared restrictive became a pedagogical strength, promoting repetition and learner engagement.

Beyond brevity, microlearning also encourages learners to engage with content in ways that suit their individual learning habits. Short videos can be revisited multiple times, shared with peers, or viewed immediately before interviews, presentations, or examinations. Such flexibility supports self-paced learning and reduces the cognitive burden associated with longer instructional videos. For pronunciation practice in particular, repeated exposure to short demonstrations allows learners to notice subtle phonetic differences that may otherwise go unnoticed during conventional classroom instruction.

Teacher Identity and Symbolic Capital

Teacher identity is fluid, continually negotiated through practice and recognition. Avidov-Ungar and Forkosh-Baruch (2018) describe three intertwined aspects of digital-era professionalism: being (expert knowledge), doing (pedagogical performance), and having (a visible persona). Online environments intensify this negotiation because visibility becomes essential to credibility.

Research by Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin (2023) shows that educators online manage multiple selves (professional, personal, and performative) depending on audience expectations. Abidin (2016) calls this calibrated amateurism, the strategic presentation of authenticity. In the author's case, formal lectures attracted less engagement than short, conversational videos, leading to deliberate adjustments in tone and delivery. The comment section, filled with requests and appreciation, became both a mirror and a feedback loop, shaping an emerging digital persona.

This evolving identity is not simply a matter of acquiring new technological skills but of negotiating changing expectations about what it means to be an effective educator. In digital environments, teachers are expected to communicate clearly, respond to learner feedback, maintain a consistent presence, and adapt content to platform-specific formats. These responsibilities extend beyond traditional classroom roles, requiring educators to balance pedagogical integrity with the demands of visibility and audience engagement. Consequently, teacher identity becomes an ongoing process of adaptation rather than a fixed professional attribute.

Bourdieu (1986) defines symbolic capital as the value derived from social recognition. In academic contexts, legitimacy is often tied to institutional roles and peer review. Online, however, it emerges from subscriber counts, likes, and community response. These metrics act as contemporary equivalents of citations or conference invitations. For the author, each subscriber milestone marked a new layer of symbolic capital, signalling acceptance by an expanding learning community and confirming the validity of a new professional space.

Affective Labour and Emotional Investment

Teaching online requires sustained emotional energy. Papacharissi (2015) notes that affective labour, i.e. the effort to project empathy, enthusiasm, and authenticity, is central to digital work. The author's journals record alternating moments of excitement and fatigue: joy at encouraging comments, anxiety

during stagnant growth and renewed purpose after each milestone. Such experiences mirror those reported in studies of digital burnout among educators and demonstrate how emotional resilience becomes a pedagogical skill in itself.

The emotional demands of digital teaching often receive less attention than the technical aspects of content creation. Planning lessons, recording multiple takes, responding to learner queries, and maintaining a regular upload schedule require sustained commitment even when immediate recognition is absent. Over time, these routine efforts become part of an educator's professional practice, reinforcing the idea that successful digital teaching depends not only on pedagogical knowledge but also on persistence, adaptability, and emotional resilience.

METHODOLOGY

The research follows an auto-ethnographic case-study design. Auto-ethnography was considered particularly appropriate because the researcher was also the participant whose experiences formed the basis of the inquiry. Rather than seeking detachment, this approach recognises the researcher's lived experience as a valuable source of knowledge, allowing personal reflections to be examined within broader educational and cultural contexts. The dual role of teacher and researcher made it possible to document changes in professional identity as they unfolded over time. Four sources of data were used:

- YouTube analytics tracking subscriber growth and audience geography;
- reflective journals documenting emotional responses;
- content-planning notes on topic selection and style changes; and
- audience feedback through comments and private messages.

These materials were collected over the course of the author's ongoing engagement with YouTube as an educational platform. Reflective journal entries were written soon after significant events, such as the publication of new videos, notable increases in subscriber count, or meaningful learner interactions, thereby minimising reliance on retrospective recall. Content-planning notes and platform analytics complemented these reflections by providing contextual evidence for emerging patterns in teaching practice and audience engagement.

Analysis moved through cycles of description, interpretation, and theoretical linking. As both

participant and researcher, the author acknowledged subjectivity as an intrinsic element of inquiry. To enhance the credibility of the analysis, recurring themes were identified across multiple data sources rather than relying on isolated incidents or individual reflections. Patterns observed in reflective journals were compared with YouTube analytics, content-planning records, and audience responses to establish consistency in interpretation. This process of continuous reflection and comparison helped ensure that the findings were grounded in sustained experience rather than momentary impressions. Ethical care was taken to anonymise all user comments and to limit discussion to publicly available information.

Research Context

The study is situated within the author's ongoing practice as an Assistant Professor of English at an agricultural university in India, where classroom teaching is complemented by creating pronunciation-focused educational content on YouTube. The channel primarily targets learners preparing for competitive examinations and those seeking to improve their spoken English. This context provides the experiential basis for examining how digital teaching influences professional identity, pedagogical practice, and symbolic capital.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Transformation of Professional Identity

Moving from a physical classroom to a digital platform required a fundamental re-imagining of what it means to teach. At first, the author viewed online lessons as an extension of institutional duties. Over time, the consistent engagement of unfamiliar audiences produced a sense of independent legitimacy. The act of teaching became intertwined with content creation, editing, and analytics monitoring, activities once peripheral to education.

This transition also altered the nature of professional responsibility. Teaching was no longer confined to scheduled classroom hours or institutional calendars. Instead, it became an ongoing process shaped by content planning, audience expectations, and continuous reflection on learner needs. Decisions about what to teach, how to present it, and how frequently to upload new content gradually became integral to pedagogical practice. The author increasingly occupied a hybrid role that combined the responsibilities of teacher, communicator, and digital creator.

Subscriber milestones functioned as social validation. Reaching 250 signified external acknowledgement; 500 marked expansion beyond local networks; 1,000 symbolised professional standing through monetisation and community-tab access. These thresholds reflect the conversion of social attention into symbolic capital, aligning with Bourdieu's (1986) view that recognition generates power within a cultural field.

Emotional Labour and Resilience

The reflective journals reveal that emotional labour was central to sustaining digital presence. Each video upload carried expectations of connection and approval. Positive feedback provided energy, while periods of silence prompted self-doubt. Over time, the author developed strategies of emotional regulation: treating analytics not as judgment but as information. This adaptation corresponds with Avidov-Ungar and Forkosh-Baruch's (2018) finding that resilience and reflexivity are defining traits of teachers in technologically mediated environments.

Emotional resilience also developed gradually through experience rather than conscious planning. In the early stages, fluctuations in views and subscriber growth often influenced motivation, making periods of slow progress particularly challenging. Over time, however, the emphasis shifted from seeking immediate validation to maintaining consistency in teaching. The discipline of creating content regularly, regardless of short-term outcomes, became an important part of the author's professional growth and reinforced a more sustainable approach to digital teaching.

The process also humanised teaching. Comments such as "This helped me in my speaking test" reintroduced the immediacy of classroom interaction, reminding the educator that behind every view count was a learner seeking guidance.

Algorithmic Influence on Pedagogy

Algorithms quietly guided pedagogical choices. Analytics showed that concise, visually dynamic videos attracted higher retention rates, prompting a move toward one-minute pronunciation "hacks." Longer explanatory videos received fewer views despite richer content. This pattern confirms Bucher's (2018) idea of "algorithmic power," in which platform design shapes human behaviour. The algorithm acted as a co-teacher, encouraging brevity and consistency. While this improved reach, it also limited depth, forcing difficult decisions about how much complexity to sacrifice for visibility.

Rather than viewing the algorithm solely as a constraint, the author gradually came to see it as a source of pedagogical feedback. Audience-retention patterns, watch time, and viewer responses offered insights into how learners engaged with different instructional approaches. Although these metrics could not determine educational quality on their own, they encouraged continuous reflection on content design, pacing, and clarity.

In this sense, platform analytics complemented rather than replaced the teacher's pedagogical judgement. The experience highlighted a tension between pedagogical integrity and platform logic, a negotiation increasingly common in digital education.

Community and Symbolic Capital

Although the channel had not yet reached the community-tab stage, learners actively reached out through comments and direct messages, requesting new lessons and clarifications. These personal interactions turned the channel into a dialogue rather than a broadcast. The teacher realised that recognition extended beyond numbers; it was embedded in recurring learner engagement and trust.

Over time, these interactions also influenced the direction of subsequent lessons. Questions raised by learners frequently became topics for future videos, while recurring doubts highlighted areas that required simpler explanations or additional examples. In this way, content development became increasingly responsive rather than predetermined. The teaching process evolved into an ongoing dialogue in which learners actively shaped the instructional journey through their participation and feedback.

This informal yet consistent feedback created a participatory dynamic: learners influenced content selection, and the teacher responded to emerging needs. Symbolic capital here was relational rather than hierarchical. These exchanges also reflect what Rus, Bucur, and Chiriac (2020) describe as “dialogic identity,” where meaning and legitimacy are co-constructed between teacher and learner in digital environments. Value is derived from collective affirmation and personal connection rather than institutional endorsement. Such exchanges illustrate how digital pedagogy can democratise professional validation while still demanding sustained labour to maintain responsiveness and authenticity.

Comparing Classroom and Platform

Traditional classrooms offered immediate, face-to-face feedback within fixed boundaries. Online

teaching extended the classroom indefinitely but replaced spontaneity with metrics. Authority in physical spaces stemmed from position, while authority online depended on consistency and perceived authenticity. This contrast underscores a larger shift from knowledge transmission to participatory learning, where teachers become facilitators of shared experience rather than sole custodians of expertise.

The comparison also revealed that the two learning environments complement rather than replace one another. Classroom teaching provides structured interaction, immediate clarification, and sustained engagement with learners, whereas digital platforms extend learning beyond institutional boundaries and allow students to revisit instructional content whenever needed. Rather than viewing these spaces as competing models of education, the author's experience suggests they can work together to create a more flexible, learner-centred educational experience.

Personal and Professional Growth

Beyond learner outcomes, the teacher experienced personal phonetic development. Continuous recording improved articulation awareness and confidence. The iterative process of explaining sounds reinforced the reciprocal nature of teaching and learning described by Krashen (1984). What began as instruction for others became self-training, demonstrating how reflective digital practice fosters professional growth.

The experience also encouraged continuous reflection on teaching itself. Explaining pronunciation concepts to a diverse online audience required greater precision, simpler explanations, and careful anticipation of learners' difficulties. This process strengthened not only the author's understanding of phonetics but also broader communication skills, reinforcing the idea that effective teaching is a continuous process of learning, adaptation, and self-improvement.

CONCLUSION

This auto-ethnographic study shows that teacher identity and professional recognition are being reshaped by digital culture. The author's experience demonstrates how online milestones, audience engagement, and emotional endurance collectively redefine what counts as legitimacy in teaching. Symbolic capital, once anchored in institutional affiliation, now circulates through networks of visibility and trust.

The study also contributes to the growing body of scholarship on digital teacher identity by demonstrating how everyday teaching experiences can be examined through auto-ethnographic inquiry. Rather than viewing digital platforms merely as technological tools, the findings position them as spaces where professional identity is continuously negotiated through interaction, reflection, and community participation. In doing so, the study extends existing discussions of teacher professionalism to creator-driven learning environments.

Digital pedagogy demands more than technical competence. It requires reflective awareness, emotional balance, and an ability to navigate algorithmic systems without losing pedagogical intent. As more educators operate in hybrid environments, understanding these dynamics becomes essential for teacher-education programs and institutional policy.

Implications for Teacher Education

Teacher-training programs should include modules on digital content creation, analytics interpretation, and emotional self-management. Educators need strategies to transform technical metrics into pedagogical insight and sustain creativity under visibility demands. Integrating reflective digital practice into teacher education can prepare instructors for hybrid learning ecosystems.

As an auto-ethnographic study based on the experiences of a single educator, the findings are context-specific and are not intended to be generalised to all teaching contexts. The value of the study lies in the depth of reflection rather than statistical representation. Nevertheless, the experiences documented here may resonate with educators who are navigating similar transitions from conventional classrooms to digital learning environments.

Future research could examine how teachers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds experience symbolic capital differently on global platforms, revealing how digital recognition intersects with sociolinguistic hierarchies. Ultimately, recognition from learners, expressed through a comment, a share, or a milestone, represents a new form of academic validation. It signals that the essence of teaching remains unchanged: meaningful connection between teacher and learner, even when mediated through pixels and code.

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