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Doing interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in applied linguistics research: A field-specific guide

Rohan K. Willis [a,1,*], Sharon Harvey [b]

[a] Graduate School of Management, Faculty of Business and Economics, Professional Teaching Fellow, The University of Auckland, New Zealand
[b] School of Education, Faculty of Culture and Society, Associate Professor, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

As applied linguistics increasingly embraces qualitative and socially situated methodologies, it has drawn on approaches from other disciplines. This paper extends that trajectory by exploring interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a qualitative methodology originating in psychology and grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. IPA offers a valuable framework for research focused on the lived experiences of language users, learners, and educators. The paper argues for a critical repositioning of IPA within applied linguistics, highlighting its capacity to examine how individuals make meaning of complex linguistic, cultural, and educational phenomena. Using data from interviews and focus groups, the IPA demonstrated here enables detailed, contextualized analysis of additional language (AL) learning and teaching practices. It attends to both individual cases and cross-case thematic patterns. By providing a methodological guide featuring a worked example from a doctoral study with New Zealand-based ESOL teachers, the analysis examines how teachers' experiences of AL learning inform their TESOL knowledge and practices and how they view their professional positioning in the TESOL sector. The paper offers strategies for rigor, transparency, and ethical reflexivity in IPA research. It concludes with a critical reflection on the strengths and limitations of IPA for researching language teacher knowledge and practice.

Introduction

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) has become an increasingly recognized analytical approach within applied linguistics, particularly in research that seeks to explore the lived experiences of language users, learners, and educators. Originally developed in psychology (Smith, 1996), IPA's adoption in applied linguistics reflects the field's growing engagement with qualitative methodologies that prioritize meaning-making, subjectivity, and context.

While IPA is no longer new to applied linguistics, what remains underdeveloped are detailed, field-specific exemplars that guide researchers through its procedures in a transparent and accessible way. Much of the available literature on IPA's analytical procedures stems from psychology and health sciences, and while some applied linguistics studies cite IPA as their guiding methodology, they tend not to provide a granular account of how the analysis was carried out. For applied linguists, particularly postgraduate students and supervisors, this can make it challenging to understand how to apply IPA rigorously within the particular epistemological and

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: rohan.willis@auckland.ac.nz (R.K. Willis), sharon.harvey@aut.ac.nz (S. Harvey).
[1] The doctoral research was conducted at Auckland University of Technology.

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analytical demands of language education research.

This paper addresses this methodological gap by offering a tutorial-style guide to IPA for applied linguistics researchers. Using selected data from a completed doctoral study on plurilingual teachers of English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and their experiences (Willis, 2023), it demonstrates how IPA's philosophical foundations (phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography) are embedded in its analytic procedures and how these principles guide the interpretation of teachers' past additional language (AL) learning, shaping their teacher knowledge (TK), practices, and views on their professional positioning. An innovative methodological aspect of the study was the inclusion of focus groups as part of the data generation process. The paper is intended as a practical resource for researchers seeking to adopt IPA in language-related contexts.

Developed in the 1990s by British qualitative psychologist Jonathan A. Smith, IPA originated in health and clinical psychology as a methodological approach to understanding how individuals make sense of significant personal experiences (Smith, 1991, 1996). IPA appears to have first been introduced to applied linguistics research in Henry (2011) study, which examined how learners' second-language (L2) English impacts their third-language (L3) selves. While the study applied phenomenological analysis techniques inspired by IPA, it did not fully adopt IPA's philosophical underpinnings or methodological framework and is, therefore, better described as IPA-informed rather than IPA-based. Another early example is Jeong and Othman's (2016) study on L2 academic literacy, which employed IPA from a realist perspective. In their study, participants' accounts were treated as direct reflections of an external reality rather than interpretations shaped by context and meaning-making. While Jeong and Othman (2016) followed IPA's analytic procedures, their underlying philosophical stance diverged from IPA's interpretivist roots. This example illustrates how the methodology has been adapted in applied linguistics research, sometimes in ways that depart from its original epistemological commitments.

In applied linguistics, IPA provides a framework for examining how individuals interpret and give meaning to language-related experiences. It allows researchers to explore each participant's lived experiences in depth, attending closely to the particularities of their interpretations, and then to identify shared patterns of meaning across participants through cross-case analysis. This interpretative and context-sensitive approach is informed by three key areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2022). Subsequent sections explain these areas and discuss how they inform IPA's use in the doctoral study, which examined how plurilingual New Zealand-based ESOL teachers perceived their AL-learning experiences as informing their TK, teaching practices, and their professional positioning in the TESOL sector (Willis, 2023). The study was guided by the theoretical framings of 'teacher knowledge' (Shulman, 1986, 1987) and 'linguistic identity' (Norton, 2013).

Literature review

Recent studies have used IPA to examine diverse language-related experiences, including language teachers' experiences with stereotypes (Egitim, 2024), language teachers' emotions during online teaching (Nazari et al., 2023), and learners' engagement with

Table 1
Selected studies using IPA in applied linguistics.

Study/Journal	Focus of Study	Sample Size	Data Type
Egitim (2024)/ *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*	Examined foreign English teachers' (FETs) lived experiences with racial, gender, and personality stereotypes in Japanese university English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts and their use of critical cultural competence-building activities as pedagogical strategies.	8 FETs	Semi-structured one-on-one interviews
Hori et al. (2025)/ *Applied Linguistics*	Explored how international students in Japan made sense of their identity formation (e.g., linguistic, cultural and national, and religious identities) through translanguaging.	2 international university students	One-on-one unstructured interviews (Applied a translanguaging lens while annotating language use during IPA analysis)
Magne et al. (2019)/ *TESOL Quarterly*	Investigated how L2 users evaluated fluency in L2 speech and which factors shaped their fluency judgments, combining acoustic analysis and interpretative accounts.	10 adult L2 English users	Semi-structured one-on-one interviews
Nazari et al. (2023)/ *Journal of Education*	Examined how Iranian English language teachers made sense of their emotional labor during online teaching, focusing on the interface between institutional expectations and internal emotional responses.	10 English language teachers	Semi-structured one-on-one interviews, reflective journals (2 rounds), and narrative frames
Tai (2024)/ *Applied Linguistics*	Examined how a primary information technology (IT) teacher in Hong Kong made sense of and enacted translanguaging while teaching programming, introducing the concept of 'transprogramming.'	1 primary IT teacher	Semi-structured video-stimulated-recall interview (IPA applied to interview data; multimodal conversation analysis used separately to examine classroom interactions)
Tai & Chung (2024)/ *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*	Investigated how English as a second language (ESL) teachers engaged with TESOL research on L2 vocabulary teaching through dialogic reflection and professional development, examining how this informed their pedagogical thinking and practices.	4 secondary school ESL teachers	Semi-structured one-on-one interviews (3 rounds per participant)
Tsang (2023)/ *TESOL Quarterly*	Explored how successful EFL learners made sense of their lived experiences with reading and listening input, highlighting the role of pleasure, modality preferences, and incidental learning.	8 recent secondary school graduates	Semi-structured one-on-one interviews and qualitative questionnaires

language input (Tsang, 2023), demonstrating the approach's relevance and adaptability across topics. To situate this work within the existing literature, Table 1 provides an overview of selected recent studies in applied linguistics that explicitly adopt IPA. These examples illustrate how IPA has been employed across varied contexts, participant types, and data sources.

The studies in Table 1 were selected to illustrate the range of designs and adaptations through which IPA has been utilized in applied linguistics. Semi-structured interviews are the most common data source, though several studies incorporate reflective journals, narrative frames, or multimodal prompts. Additionally, although each study references IPA, none offer detailed exemplars of their analytic procedures, making it difficult to see how their analyses were guided by IPA's three areas of the philosophy of knowledge (phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography). In contrast, this paper provides a tutorial-style guide that demonstrates how IPA can be philosophically grounded and analytically trustworthy, using data from a doctoral study on plurilingual ESOL teachers' perceptions of the contribution of their past AL learning (Willis, 2023).

IPA'S three areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography

An important aspect of IPA is its grounding in three interconnected areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. These foundations inform how participants' experiences are understood, how meaning is interpreted, and how the uniqueness of each case is approached. While IPA shares some commonalities with other qualitative approaches, such as grounded theory and narrative inquiry, it is particularly well suited to research that seeks to understand how language-related experiences shape individuals' evolving sense of self, knowledge, and professional practice. Table 2 summarizes these three areas of philosophy of knowledge and their application in applied linguistics research. The following sections build on this summary by discussing each area in more depth and illustrating how they informed the analytic approach in the doctoral study (Willis, 2023).

Phenomenology

Phenomenology, the study of lived experience, is IPA's first philosophy of knowledge and focuses on how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds (Smith et al., 2022). Although IPA draws some conceptual influence from German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1960) descriptive phenomenology, its interpretative commitment aligns more closely with hermeneutic phenomenology, particularly as developed by Heidegger (1962) and Gadamer (2004). In IPA, phenomenology is not treated as an abstract philosophy but as a means of engaging with experiences as lived, embodied, and situated in context. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of both the experience itself and the sense-making processes through which it becomes meaningful.

In applied linguistics research, phenomenology provides a valuable framework for exploring how individuals experience language-related phenomena in ways that are emotionally, historically, and socially situated. In the doctoral study (Willis, 2023), this phenomenological lens was complemented by theoretical framings of 'teacher knowledge' (Shulman, 1986, 1987) and 'linguistic identity' (Norton, 2013), which together informed the exploration of how plurilingual New Zealand-based ESOL teachers 'lived through' their AL-learning and TESOL experiences. This includes how they evaluated their former AL teachers' teaching practices, responded to those experiences, and positioned themselves in relation to dominant ideologies in the TESOL sector, with these experiences understood as contextualized rather than as detached cognitive or behavioral processes. For instance, one participant described learning French through the audiolingual method, spending hours in a language lab listening to recorded speech and repeating it aloud in real time. Their account highlighted how the method was 'lived,' as they appreciated its support for pronunciation but also experienced it as emotionally disconnected. IPA enabled the researcher to analyze how learning was felt and made meaningful within the participant's specific context.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, the second area of IPA's philosophy of knowledge, focuses on the interpretative process through which meaning is constructed and negotiated (Smith et al., 2022). While phenomenology attends to how individuals describe and make sense of their lived experiences, hermeneutics emphasizes that these experiences are always mediated through language and shaped by interpretation, both by the participant and the researcher. From this perspective, understanding is co-constructed through discourse and reflection. In the doctoral study (Willis, 2023), this interpretive orientation guided a close analysis of how plurilingual ESOL teachers made sense of the relationship between their past AL learning and teaching practices, including how they reflected on their learning

Table 2
Philosophical foundations of IPA and their application to applied linguistics research.

Philosophical Area	Core Concept	How It Informs IPA	Application to Applied Linguistics
Phenomenology	Lived experience	Focuses on how individuals experience specific phenomena in their lifeworlds	Supports detailed examination of language users', learners', or educators' lived experiences (e.g., learning experiences, teaching practices, linguistic identity)
Hermeneutics	Interpretation	Focuses on how researchers interpret participants' meaning-making within a context	Enables interpretation of how individuals construct meaning around language-related experiences (e.g., language learning, use, identity, teaching, or policy engagement)
Idiography	The particular	Focuses on in-depth, case-by-case analysis before identifying patterns across cases	Treats each participant's account as a unique case, useful for understanding both convergent and divergent meanings assigned to language-related experiences

histories, the value they placed on their AL learning, and how they perceived their professional positioning in the TESOL sector.

Hermeneutic phenomenology, particularly the work of Heidegger (1962) and Gadamer (2004, 2007), underpins IPA's view that understanding is always situated and interpretive, and mediated by language. Moving away from Husserl (1960, 1983) pursuit of detached description, Heidegger (1962) argued that interpretation is inseparable from *Dasein*, or 'Being-in-the-world' (Steiner, 1978), where individuals' histories, cultures, and social contexts shape their sense-making. Gadamer (2004, 2007) extended this by introducing the concept of 'historicality' (the idea that understanding is shaped by one's historical and cultural backgrounds) and by emphasizing the dialogic nature of interpretation. In IPA, this process is described as a double hermeneutic (Smith et al., 2009), where the researcher interprets how participants interpret their lived experiences. In the doctoral study (Willis, 2023), this lens guided the analysis of participants' reflections on their AL learning and teaching, with close attention to how they expressed these experiences through language. Their lexical choices, syntactic patterns, and hesitations were analyzed, which, for example, showed underlying tensions around belonging (e.g., AL-learning classroom, professional teaching communities) alongside concerns about professional standing and linguistic authority in the TESOL sector. For instance, one participant recalled being known as '*the student with the paper with no name*' during their early schooling as an immigrant child in Australia. At the time, they knew no English and did not yet know how to write their own name, often submitting schoolwork without identifying information. Their language use (e.g., '*I didn't even know how to write my own name*') echoed not only the memory of linguistic struggle but also the emotional weight of being unseen, which was interpreted as part of their broader positioning as a marginalized English language learner and, later, as an ESOL teacher sensitive to their students' vulnerability.

Idiography

Idiography, IPA's third area of the philosophy of knowledge (Smith et al., 2022), emphasizes detailed, case-by-case attention to how meaning is uniquely constructed by individuals (Lamiell, 2003; Jones, 2007). While phenomenology focuses on how lived experiences are shaped by the specific contexts in which they occur and hermeneutics on interpretation, idiography stresses the importance of understanding each participant's account in its own terms without rushing to generalize. This idiographic commitment sets IPA apart from other qualitative approaches that prioritize broad pattern recognition (Smith et al., 2022).

In the doctoral study (Willis, 2023), idiography guided a systematic analysis of each participant's perception of the relationship between their past AL learning and professional roles. Each transcript was examined independently to interpret how the participant made sense of their learning history, TK, practices, and sense of professional positioning, with careful attention to how each account was shaped by prior educational and professional experiences and by linguistic identity. For example, two participants reflected on and evaluated their former AL teachers' use of rote memorization, yet interpreted the method in contrasting ways. One described it as overly mechanical, while the other found it beneficial for reinforcing pronunciation and meaning. These interpretations were not generalized. This idiographic orientation enabled the analysis to retain the distinct meaning-making of each participant, illustrating how even similar instructional experiences can lead to different understandings that shape perspectives on AL education in applied linguistics research.

Application of IPA in applied linguistics research

IPA offers a distinctive approach to examining how individuals make sense of their experiences, including in applied linguistics research, where language, identity, and professional practice are often deeply intertwined. Its emphasis on lived experience, interpretive depth, participants' language use, and its idiographic focus on the particular allows researchers to explore contextually grounded understandings that may not emerge through approaches primarily focused on identifying common patterns across participants. In the doctoral study (Willis, 2023), IPA provided a methodological approach for examining how plurilingual ESOL teachers made sense of and articulated their experiences of AL learning and how these experiences informed their TK, teaching practices, and perceptions of their professional positioning in the TESOL sector. The following sub-sections outline how IPA informed key elements of the study, including participant selection, data collection through focus groups and one-on-one interviews, the analytical steps, and the presentation of findings. Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness, guided by Smith (2011a, 2011b) recommendations, are also discussed.

The doctoral study that informs this methodological guide was shaped by the following overarching research question (ORQ) and sub-questions (SQs):

ORQ: How do New Zealand-based plurilingual ESOL teachers' instructed additional-language (AL) learning experiences impact their professional roles?

SQ1: How do ESOL teachers perceive the impact of their past instructed AL learning on their TESOL knowledge?

SQ2: In what ways do or don't they integrate their past instructed AL learning into their ESOL teaching practices?

SQ3: How do ESOL teachers perceive the impact of their instructed AL-learning experiences on their individual professional standing and the broader TESOL profession? (Willis, 2023)

Participant selection

Participant selection in the doctoral study (Willis, 2023) aligned with IPA's emphasis on exploring subjective experiences and understanding how individuals interpret and ascribe meaning to their personal and social worlds. Consistent with IPA's focus on the

detailed examination of how individuals make sense of particular phenomena within their unique contexts (Smith et al., 2022), participants were selected for their ability to provide specific insights into the contribution of their AL-learning experiences, rather than to represent a broader population.

The study involved 14 participants, reflecting the sample size that Smith et al. (2022) note is appropriate for doctoral research. While they recommend a sample of three to six participants for undergraduate and graduate studies, they acknowledge that larger samples may be suitable for doctoral projects as long as sufficient analytic depth can be maintained. As Smith et al. (2009) caution, samples that are considered "too large" (p. 51) may compromise methodological rigor, and smaller samples are recommended to sustain the idiographic commitment central to IPA.

Participants for the study were purposively selected to form a relatively homogeneous group comprising practicing ESOL teachers in New Zealand who had received formal instruction in at least one additional language. This selection approach reflects IPA's emphasis on recruiting individuals who can offer detailed, first-hand insights into the research phenomena and are likely to find the research question(s) personally meaningful (Smith et al., 2022). Rather than aiming for broad representation, the study sought participants who shared key contextual and experiential characteristics, supporting the idiographic focus of IPA. The research questions, informed by the theoretical framings of 'teacher knowledge' (Shulman, 1986, 1987) and 'linguistic identity' (Norton, 2013), focused on how participants' AL-learning experiences informed their TK, practices, and views on their professional standing in the sector. Recruitment criteria included:

a) prior experience learning at least one AL in formal instructional settings;
b) self-reported bilingual or plurilingual proficiency;
c) TESOL certification (e.g., CELTA or equivalent or higher); and
d) at least three years of ESOL-teaching experience in New Zealand or internationally (Willis, 2023).

The criteria ensured sufficient commonality to allow for a detailed exploration of the topic while preserving diversity in individual experiences.

Data generation: focus-group discussions and interviews

Focus-group discussions and semi-structured one-on-one interviews were selected as data collection methods in the doctoral study (Willis, 2023) to elicit rich, in-depth "stories" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 56) that explored participants' lived experiences, thoughts, and feelings, consistent with IPA's methodological emphasis. In line with Smith et al. (2022) suggestion that in-depth interviews are particularly well-suited to IPA for capturing detailed personal accounts and that focus-group discussions can also be employed to explore shared meaning-making, both methods were used to gather detailed and contextually grounded insights.

In the study, focus groups were conducted first, with each session lasting 70 to 120 minutes. This decision was informed by a pilot interview that suggested one-on-one interviews alone did not elicit sufficiently in-depth reflections on the contribution of past AL learning. In that interview, it was challenging to activate the pilot participant's recall without introducing the interviewer's own experiences as prompts. Focus group questions were designed to explore participants' TESOL experiences and practices, such as their years of teaching experience and teaching challenges, but these were not intended to exclude discussions of AL learning. On the contrary, participants often drew on their own AL-learning histories when discussing professional challenges, making connections between these experiences and their current teaching. For example, when asked, "*What do you think are some of the most challenging aspects of being an ESOL teacher? Why?*" participants often linked their responses to their experiences as former AL learners. Follow-up questions were used within the same sessions to probe these reflections further. Although focus groups are less common in IPA research (e.g., Flowers et al., 2001; MacLeod et al., 2002), they proved valuable in the study by allowing participants to build on one another's reflections and share both individual and collective insights. As Ellis (2016) notes, teachers are not often prompted to reflect on their AL learning, and in our experience, the group setting helped participants feel less isolated, encouraging responses to a topic that was not always immediately accessible.

Following the focus-group discussions, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted. For participants who attended the focus groups, the interviews centered primarily on their experiences as former AL learners, occasionally returning to themes raised during the group discussions. Questions addressed topics such as the AL(s) participants had learned and the teaching practices employed by their former AL teachers. For those who had not participated in a focus group, the interviews explored both their TESOL and AL-learning experiences. For instance, the question "*What were some of the teaching practices that your language teachers used?*" prompted reflections on practices they encountered as AL learners and how these experiences shaped their perceptions of effective and ineffective teaching. Participants also discussed how particular practices impacted their learning, emotions, and motivation, highlighting connections between their past AL learning and their TK and practices. The interviews supported participants in articulating how they made sense of their learning experiences and how these informed their professional roles, consistent with IPA's emphasis on interpretative meaning-making. This approach allowed for a detailed exploration of how participants' affective, cognitive, and behavioral experiences as AL learners shaped their TK and teaching.

All focus group and interview sessions were audio-recorded, and written notes were taken during each session with participant consent. These notes captured both verbal and non-verbal aspects of the discussions. Some verbal notes highlighted ideas that

warranted further exploration, such as participants' detailed accounts of teaching practices experienced as former AL learners. Non-verbal observations, including facial expressions or gestures that suggested hesitation or discomfort, provided additional interpretative cues. These notes served two purposes: informing follow-up questions during the sessions and enriching the analysis by offering contextual insights that supported deeper engagement with participants' meaning-making.

Step-by-step guide to IPA analysis

To align the analysis with the focus of the doctoral study (Willis, 2023), the six-step process outlined by Smith et al. (2009) was adapted and expanded into seven steps. As IPA is a flexible analytical approach (Smith, 2004) rather than a prescriptive method (Smith & Osborn, 2008), refinements were made to better support the examination of the contribution of participants' AL-learning experiences within an applied linguistics context. An additional step (i.e., transcribing audio recordings into text) was introduced to capture verbal and paralinguistic features such as false starts and laughter, which supported early interpretative engagement. Some terminology was also refined to enhance clarity. For example, 'initial noting' was reworded as 'analyzing texts through a three-stage process' to make the analytic procedures more explicit. Similarly, Smith et al. (2009) 'developing emergent themes' was adapted to 'identifying personal experiential themes (PETs),' drawing on the updated terminology in Smith et al. (2022), and changing the phrasing from 'developing' to 'identifying' to better reflect the interpretative and analytical nature of this step. The step involving connections across themes was also refined to support the development of 'group experiential themes (GETs),' as outlined by Smith et al. (2022), rather than treating these as equivalent. These adaptations were intended to enhance clarity and align the analytic process with the study's aims in applied linguistics. Table 3 presents an overview of the adapted analytical process used to explore how participants made sense of the relationship between their AL learning and ESOL teaching.

Step 1: transcribing audio files into texts. The first step of the analytical process in the study involved converting audio recordings into transcripts. Although transcription is not listed as a formal step in Smith et al.'s (2009) six-step process, it was introduced here as an initial step to support early interpretative engagement with participants' meaning-making. Transcribing the data allowed for close attention to nuanced features of spoken language, such as false starts and laughter, which are important in IPA. Transcription was facilitated using Nuance Dragon Professional version 15, a voice-recognition software customized for the transcriber's voice. Because the software could not directly process participants' voices, the transcriber repeated participants' utterances aloud to generate text. This semi-manual process involved tasks such as inserting punctuation and correcting homonyms. Although more advanced tools (e.g., Otter.ai, AssemblyAI) are now available, this method ensured repeated engagement with the recordings, helping the researcher become deeply familiar with each account and attuned to features like intonation, emphasis, and paralinguistic cues. In line with IPA's emphasis on preserving authenticity, transcripts included both verbal and non-verbal elements, such as false starts, laughter, pauses, and grammatical errors/mistakes. These were treated as integral to participants' meaning-making, offering further insight into their emotions, attitudes, and perspectives. A transcription key was adapted from Smith et al. (2009) to better capture verbal and paralinguistic features relevant to the study. Additional conventions were included to indicate emphasis, describe actions, and clarify meaning where necessary. The transcription key used for the study is provided in Table 4.

Each transcript from the study was formatted using a two-column layout. The left column contained the transcribed text, while the right column was initially left blank for analytic annotations during later steps of analysis. This format facilitated close, line-by-line engagement with participants' accounts, supporting the iterative and interpretative nature of IPA. Fig. 1 illustrates this layout with an extract from the study, where a participant, Enna (pseudonym), discusses a teaching practice she employed.

Step 2: reading and re-reading each transcript and interview notes. In line with IPA's idiographic focus, steps two through five were completed in full for each transcript before proceeding to the next. This approach allowed for a detailed interpretative analysis of each participant's account prior to identifying patterns across cases. Step two involved thoroughly and repeatedly reading each transcript alongside the corresponding interview notes, following recommendations by Smith et al. (2009) and Larkin and Thompson (2012). To enhance familiarity with the data, visual engagement with each transcript was paired with auditory engagement by reading while

Table 3
Analytical Steps in IPA (adapted from Smith et al., 2009, 2022; Willis, 2023).

Step 1:	Transcribing audio files into texts
Step 2:	Reading and re-reading each transcript and interview notes
Step 3:	Analyzing texts through a three-stage process
	Stage 1: Describing the content of what was being said by the participant
	Stage 2: Commenting on the participant's specific use of language
	Stage 3: Connecting and making interpretative comments on the participant's overarching understanding of their experiences
Step 4:	Identifying emergent personal experiential themes (PETs) within each transcript
Step 5:	Searching for connections across emergent PETs
Step 6:	Moving to the next transcript and repeating steps 2 to 5
Step 7:	Looking for patterns across all emergent themes to develop group experiential themes (GETs)

Table 4
Transcription key (adapted from Smith et al., 2009; Willis, 2023).

Code	Meaning
()	Describes an action
[]	Inserted words for clarification
[…]	Irrelevant material omitted
In caps	Word emphasized

Enna: Um (pause) Well, like, I think a recent example would be (pause) We were writing an essay, and some students had no idea how to start. Because I think when I was learning English, my fear was writing, and I was not confident to write. And, every time when I heard the word writing,' I was like: Argh, it's a pain! So, I told them I had the same problem before. And, I gave them an essay planner and I helped them to break down the essay into different parts.	

Fig. 1. Sample transcript layout.

listening to the original audio recordings. This process deepened understanding of participants' "stories" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 56) and the meanings they conveyed, forming the foundation for subsequent idiographic analysis in the remaining steps.

To support the early stages of analysis in the study, participants' responses were temporarily organized into three broad categories, informed by the study's theoretical lenses of 'teacher knowledge' (Shulman, 1986, 1987) and 'linguistic identity' (Norton, 2013). These categories were: a) 'background,' capturing participants' language and educational histories; b) 'learner's perspective,' reflecting their experiences as former AL learners; and c) 'teacher's perspective,' focusing on their current roles as ESOL teachers. Excerpts from each transcript were color-coded according to these categories to aid visual tracking and facilitate preliminary analysis. Fig. 2 presents the same excerpt from Enna shown in Fig. 1, now annotated to reflect this initial organizational layer.

Enna: Um (pause) Well, like, I think a recent example would be (pause) We were writing an essay, and some students had no idea how to start. Because I think when I was learning English, my fear was writing, and I was not confident to write. And, every time when I heard the word writing,' I was like: Argh, it's a pain! So, I told them I had the same problem before. And, I gave them an essay planner and I helped them to break down the essay into different parts.	Learner's Perspective Teacher's Perspective

Fig. 2. Sample transcript: color-coded temporary categories.

Step 3: analyzing texts through a three-stage process. Following the initial reading and organization of each transcript, step three of the analysis involved a structured, three-stage interpretative process. In this step, analytical observations were recorded as 'comments,' a term used in IPA literature (e.g., Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith et al., 2009), in the right-hand column of the two-column transcript layout. The three stages of interpretation included:

- Stage 1: Describing the content of what was being said by the participant;
- Stage 2: Commenting on the participant's specific use of language; and
- Stage 3: Connecting and making interpretative comments on the participant's overarching understanding of their experiences (adapted from Smith et al., 2009; Willis, 2023).

Stage 1: Making descriptive comments. The first stage of analyzing the texts involved making descriptive comments on participants' statements. This stage focused on describing the data's content and identifying key ideas, events, and experiences emphasized by participants, following Smith et al. (2009) guidelines. By making descriptive comments, the analysis captured aspects of participants' accounts that they regarded as meaningful. Fig. 3 shows Enna's excerpt alongside the corresponding descriptive comments.

Stage 2: Commenting on the participant's specific use of language. The second stage of analyzing texts focused on participants' specific language use, exploring how they conveyed and assigned meanings to their lived experiences. Following Smith et al. (2009), attention was paid not only to lexical choice but also to how metaphors, phrasing patterns, and syntactic structures reflected participants' perspectives. We interpreted this focus on language as a form of 'linguistic noticing,' emphasizing sensitivity to how participants expressed meaning without applying a systematic discourse analysis, such as critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989). For example, a participant described learning English through immersion with the metaphor: "*You were kind of thrown in, you know. You swim or you sink* [sic]" (Willis, 2023). This imagery highlighted their perception of immersion as demanding self-reliance while evoking a sense of vulnerability and lack of agency. Fig. 4 illustrates comments on Enna's specific language use in the excerpt.

Stage 3: Making interpretative comments to analyze the participant's overarching understanding. The third stage of analyzing texts involved making interpretative comments to explore each participant's overarching understandings of their experiences. Smith et al. (2009) emphasize that this stage involves moving beyond participants' "explicit claims" (p. 88) to identify patterns and structures within their "stories" (p. 56) that offer more granular insights into meaning-making. Rather than treating transcripts as disconnected segments, each participant's account was considered as a cohesive whole, supporting an integrated interpretation of how they perceived their lived experiences. In the study (Willis, 2023), this stage facilitated the analysis of how participants viewed the contribution of their past AL learning to the development of their TK, teaching practices, and their sense of professional standing in the TESOL sector. Fig. 5 shows interpretative comments on Enna's overarching understanding of her experiences.

Step 4: identifying emergent personal experiential themes (PETs) within each transcript. Building on the three stages of commenting in step three, step four involved systematically identifying patterns, connections, and relationships within each transcript. In line with IPA's idiographic commitment, each transcript was treated as a distinct case, with emergent PETs grounded in that participant's lived experiences. This included transcripts from both one-on-one interviews and focus-group discussions. For focus groups, individual contributions were isolated and analyzed separately to preserve the idiographic focus. The process entailed re-engaging with the transcript and the associated descriptive, language-use, and interpretative comments to trace recurring ideas, emotional expressions, and underlying meanings. For example, some PETs captured participants' emotional responses to teaching practices they remembered and later fully adopted, partially adopted, or avoided as ESOL teachers. An Excel table was used to organize PETs for each transcript, with distinct colors assigned to support clarity and traceability during analysis. Fig. 6 illustrates the PETs identified in Enna's one-on-

Enna:	Learner's Perspective • Describes writing as a source of fear and a lack of confidence as a former learner • Associates writing with pain Teacher's Perspective • Describes observing that some students struggled with initiating the essay-writing process • Draws on her own past struggles and states her shared experience • Describes her proactive response by providing students with an essay planner
Um (pause) Well, like, I think a recent example would be (pause) We were writing an essay, and some students had no idea how to start. Because I think when I was learning English, my fear was writing, and I was not confident to write. And, every time when I heard the word writing,' I was like: Argh, it's a pain! So, I told them I had the same problem before. And, I gave them an essay planner and I helped them to break down the essay into different parts.	

Fig. 3. Sample descriptions of the data.

Enna:	Learner's Perspective
Um (pause) Well, like, I think a recent example would be (pause) We were writing an essay, and some students had no idea how to start. Because I think when I was learning English, my fear was writing, and I was not confident to write. And, every time when I heard the word writing,' I was like: Argh, it's a pain! So, I told them I had the same problem before. And, I gave them an essay planner and I helped them to break down the essay into different parts.	• Personal pronouns: Frequent use of 'I' emphasizes her personal experience, linking past struggles and her current understanding of the issue • Temporal indicator: 'When I was learning' situates the experience in the past, framing it as either factual or reflective • Repetition of 'writing': Highlights its significance as a source of anxiety • Expressive language: 'Argh, it's a pain!' conveys a visceral emotional reaction and psychological impact of writing Teacher's Perspective • Hesitations and fillers ('um,' 'well,' 'like,' 'I think'): These features suggest that she is cautiously engaging with a memory that may remain emotionally and cognitively complex • Plural personal pronoun: 'We' establishes collective involvement, positioning her alongside the students in the activity • Shared experience: 'I told them I had the same problem before' reflects empathy, linking her past struggles to her students' challenges. • Active verbs: Actions like 'I gave them an essay planner' and 'I helped them to break down the essay' reflect her hands-on approach and active role in problem-solving

Fig. 4. Sample comments on participant's specific language use.

one interview transcript. While PETs from each transcript were initially treated independently, shared themes across transcripts were later examined through cross-case analysis, as discussed in step six.

Step 5: searching for connections across emergent PETs. Step five involved examining the PETs identified within each transcript to explore potential relationships among them. The aim was to identify patterns, conceptual links, and experiential similarities across PETs within the same transcript. Following Fade (2004) recommendation, questions were posed about each PET to determine whether others addressed related experiences or meanings, thereby supporting the clustering of related ideas. When clear conceptual overlaps emerged, PETs were merged into broader sub-themes that represented more integrated experiential patterns. For instance, the PETs '*negative feelings toward former AL teachers' practices*' and '*positive feelings toward former AL teachers' practices*' were combined into a sub-theme reflecting participants' descriptions and evaluations of their former AL teachers' teaching practices: *teaching practices experienced as AL learners*. Throughout this step, care was taken to preserve the integrity of each participant's account, whether drawn from a one-on-one interview or a focus group transcript, in keeping with IPA's idiographic focus.

Although many PETs were merged into broader sub-themes, others lacked clear conceptual connections or relevance to the research questions and were, therefore, excluded from further analysis. Such exclusions are a common part of qualitative analysis processes, particularly in IPA (Smith et al., 2009), where not all experiential accounts necessarily contribute to the evolving thematic structure. In the doctoral study (Willis, 2023), PETs that could not be integrated into the developing thematic structure or lacked

Enna:	Learner's Perspective
Um (pause) Well, like, I think a recent example would be (pause) We were writing an essay, and some students had no idea how to start. Because I think when I was learning English, my fear was writing, and I was not confident to write. And, every time when I heard the word writing,' I was like: Argh, it's a pain! So, I told them I had the same problem before. And, I gave them an essay planner and I helped them to break down the essay into different parts.	• Later discussed other areas of English (e.g., grammar) she struggled with as a language learner Teacher's Perspective • Previously mentioned that true empathy with students comes from personal AL-learning experience • Later discusses reflecting on her own learning experiences and considering what her former ESOL teachers could have done to enhance her learning **Overarching understanding:** Her overarching understanding of her ESOL-learning experiences reflects a connection between her struggles as a learner and her current teaching practices. While she faced challenges across multiple aspects of English learning, her reflections emphasize that genuine empathy stems from personal AL-learning experiences. These insights inform her teaching, emphasizing practices that address both the cognitive and emotional needs of her students.

Fig. 5. Sample interpretative comments on participant's overarching understanding of their experiences.

PETs
Descriptions of former AL teachers' practices
Negative feelings toward former AL teachers' practices
Positive feelings toward former AL teachers' practices
Struggles faced in instructed AL Learning
Positive instructed AL-learning experiences
Reasons for learning ALs
TESOL experiences
Perceptions on (dis)advantages of having learned an AL as an ESOL teacher
Prejudice experienced/observed in the TESOL sector

Fig. 6. Examples of temporary PETs from Enna's one-on-one interview transcript.

sufficient supporting evidence were excluded, following Pietkiewicz and Smith's (2012) recommendation. For example, while several participants reflected on negative experiences with past AL learning due to their former teachers' practices, one participant attributed their resentment toward AL learning to family-related factors. Because this temporary PET did not align with the study's research questions, it was excluded from the final analysis.

Organizing, refining, condensing, and naming sub-themes is often a complex and challenging process (Fade, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith et al., 2022). To address these challenges, we worked closely with the emergent PETs, occasionally returning to the relevant transcripts and the analytical comments generated in step three that had informed their development. While Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) recommend prioritizing interpretative comments over full transcript re-engagement, this combined approach supported clearer conceptual grouping and more detailed insights into experiential patterns. Temporary PETs were systematically documented and updated in an Excel table to ensure clarity and traceability throughout the process.

Step 6: moving to the next transcript and repeating steps 2 to 5. Step six involved transitioning to the next transcript and systematically repeating the analytical process outlined in steps two through five. As Smith and Osborn (2008) describe, researchers can either a) retain PETs from earlier transcripts and build on them as new data emerge or b) treat each new transcript independently, setting aside previous PETs. In the doctoral study, a hybrid approach was adopted (Willis, 2023). PETs from earlier transcripts were retained to help recognize potential patterns across cases, while each new transcript was analyzed on its own terms to identify PETs grounded in that transcript's representation of lived experience. This method streamlined the identification of provisional PETs while preserving the idiographic focus central to IPA. Importantly, analysis during this step remained at the individual-case level and did not yet involve cross-case analysis or the development of group experiential themes (GETs). Given the sample size ($n = 14$), this approach balanced idiographic depth with the practical need for analytic manageability.

Step 7: looking for patterns across all emergent themes to develop group experiential themes (GETs). Step seven, the final step of analysis, involved conducting a cross-case analysis of PETs to develop GETs, which served as the main themes capturing shared experiential patterns across the dataset. Each GET encompassed sub-themes that reflected different dimensions of the broader theme. To maintain the idiographic grounding of the analysis, we remained closely engaged with the data, continually revisiting transcripts and analytical notes to ensure that emerging GETs were cohesive and grounded in lived experience. Attention was also given to the interconnectedness of GETs. Rather than treating themes as isolated categories, we examined how GETs and sub-themes interacted with and informed one another, reflecting the fluid and holistic nature of lived experiences. For example, overlap was observed between the sub-theme '*reported impact of former AL teachers' teaching practices on own ESOL teaching*,' under the GET '*past instructed AL learning and its reported impact on ESOL teaching*,' and the sub-theme '*enacted empathy*,' under the GET '*enhanced empathy for English language learners (ELLs)*' (see below). Both sub-themes illustrated how participants' past AL learning informed their TK and practices. Fig. 7 presents the GETs and sub-themes identified through this cross-case analysis.

Identified group experiential themes (GETs)

Data analysis in the doctoral study (Willis, 2023) identified three GETs that captured how participants' AL-learning experiences informed their TK, teaching practices, and perceptions of their professional standing in the sector. The following presents an overview of each GET and its corresponding sub-themes.

The first GET, *past instructed AL learning and its reported impact on ESOL teaching*, examined how participants' experiences as AL learners informed their TK and teaching practices. This theme addressed the ORQ and the first two SQs by examining participants' accounts of their former AL teachers' practices and how these experiences shaped their own pedagogical decisions. Guided by the study's theoretical framings of 'teacher knowledge' (Shulman, 1986, 1987) and 'linguistic identity' (Norton, 2013), three interrelated sub-themes were identified:

a) *teaching practices experienced as AL learners*, which involved participants describing and evaluating the practices their former AL teachers employed;

Group Experiential Themes (GETs)	Sub-Themes
A) Past instructed AL Learning and its Reported Impact on ESOL Teaching	**i)** Teaching Practices Experienced as AL Learners
	ii) Language-Pedagogical Knowledge Gained from Past Instructed AL Learning
	iii) Reported Impact of Former AL Teachers' Teaching Practices on Own ESOL Teaching
B) Enhanced Empathy for English Language Learners (ELLs)	**i)** Reflective Empathy
	ii) Enacted Empathy
C) Teachers' Perspectives of the TESOL Profession	**i)** Country of origin and L1 Prejudice
	ii) Accent Prejudice
	iii) Appearance Prejudice

Fig. 7. Group Experiential Themes (GETs) and Sub-Themes (Willis, 2023).

b) *language-pedagogical knowledge gained from past instructed AL learning*, which captured the language-teaching knowledge participants reportedly developed through AL learning (e.g., experiential knowledge of AL learning, language awareness); and
c) *reported impact of former AL teachers' teaching practices on own ESOL teaching*, which examined how participants reportedly incorporated, adapted, or distanced themselves from these practices in their current teaching (Willis, 2023).

The second GET, *enhanced empathy for English language learners (ELLs)*, examined how participants' past AL learning contributed to the development of empathy toward their students. In relation to the ORQ and the second SQ, this theme was about how participants understood the relationship between their own AL-learning experiences and their empathy for their students' learning processes. Two phases of empathy, identified as the sub-themes of this theme, were distinguished:

a) *reflective empathy*: which involved participants recognizing and relating to the struggles and successes experienced by their students based on their own AL-learning experiences; and
b) *enacted empathy*: which captured how participants translated their reflective understanding into specific teaching practices aimed at supporting their students (Willis, 2023; Willis et al., 2025).

The third GET, *teachers' perceptions of the TESOL profession*, examined how participants' past AL learning shaped their views of their professional standing within the TESOL sector. This theme addressed the third SQ by exploring how participants perceived the role of their AL learning and linguistic identities in shaping their professional recognition, particularly within private, for-profit TESOL sectors in New Zealand and abroad. While participants acknowledged the personal and professional value of their AL learning, many highlighted that these experiences were often overlooked during hiring processes and in the workplace, where attributes such as country of origin, first language (L1), accent, and appearance were often prioritized. Findings show that native-speakerism (Holliday, 2015), which positions native-English-speaking teachers as superior to non-native English-speaking teachers, was reflected in the three interrelated sub-themes identified through the analysis:

a. *country of origin and L1 prejudice*, which captured participants' perceptions of discrimination based on the nationality or L1 background of some ESOL teachers;
b. *accent prejudice*, which reflected participants' observations and experiences with bias related to ESOL teachers' spoken English accents;
c. *appearance prejudice*, which described racialized assumptions that participants witnessed and perceived to impact some ESOL teachers' professional opportunities and workplace treatment (Willis, 2023).

Presenting IPA findings

When reporting IPA findings, applied linguistics researchers are encouraged to adopt a structured and transparent approach that shows how interpretations are grounded in participants' data. The aim is not only to present excerpts but also to demonstrate the interpretative moves that connect participant data to the development of GETs and sub-themes. The following principles support effective presentation of IPA findings:

- Use illustrative excerpts: Select quotations that convey experiential claims or linguistic patterns relevant to each theme.
- Add interpretative commentary: Move beyond description to explain how participants' specific language choices construct meaning.
- Provide contextual information and link it to analysis: Include relevant details about the participant (e.g., pseudonym, demographic or experiential background, and method of data collection) to situate excerpts and clarify how context informs interpretation.
- Enhance readability: Format excerpts clearly (e.g., indented, italicized) and separate them visually from the researcher's commentary.
- Maintain analytic alignment: Show how interpretations arise from the excerpts and contribute to the GET.

This approach was implemented in the doctoral study (Willis, 2023). Descriptive comments were integrated as brief, context-setting statements that oriented readers to the experiential claim illustrated. Each GET and its sub-themes were supported by excerpts that were closely tied to interpretative commentary, making explicit the analytic connection between participant data and broader claims.

Fig. 8, accompanied by interpretative commentary, illustrates this style of findings presentation:

> *I gave [the students] an essay planner and I helped them to break down the essay into different parts*. (Enna, L1s Cantonese & Mandarin / AL English, one-on-one interview)

Fig. 8. Sample excerpt.

Enna emphasizes the practical support she provides learners through an "*essay planner*," suggesting her awareness of their need for step-by-step scaffolding in academic writing. Her phrasing, "*helped them to break down*," indicates reflective empathy that draws from her own experiences as a former AL learner. This reflective empathy informs Enna's enacted empathy (Willis et al., 2025), as she translates her understanding of learners' difficulties into targeted teaching practices.

Trustworthiness

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, the doctoral study (Willis, 2023) aligned with Smith (2011a, 2011b) quality evaluation guidelines. The study remained consistent with IPA's theoretical principles by focusing on participants' lived experiences (the phenomenological), interpreting their expressed meanings (the hermeneutic), and conducting an in-depth analysis of each transcript (the idiographic). Transparency was maintained through clear documentation of data collection and analysis procedures, allowing readers to understand how interpretations were developed. The analyses aimed to be coherent, plausible, and engaging, offering meaningful insights into participants' experiences. Credibility was further supported by the inclusion of excerpts from at least three participants for each sub-theme, demonstrating both the prevalence of experiential patterns and the richness of supporting evidence. For example, the three sub-themes under the first GET (*past instructed AL learning and its reported impact on ESOL teaching*) were supported by data from $n = 11$, $n = 10$, and $n = 8$ participants, respectively. This approach addressed a concern raised by Smith (2018) during a workshop in San Francisco, where he cautioned that IPA studies risk being insufficiently grounded when each GET is supported by only a single extract without evidence across the dataset.

Conclusion

This paper has presented IPA as a practical and accessible analytical approach for applied linguistics researchers, particularly those exploring AL learning, teaching, and linguistic identity. It contributes by providing step-by-step guidance grounded in IPA's three areas of the philosophy of knowledge and is illustrated through authentic data from a TESOL-focused doctoral study (Willis, 2023). By tailoring IPA's philosophical areas, analytical steps, and examples to applied linguistics contexts, the paper addresses a gap in the field, where researchers may be familiar with IPA's broader literature but lack field-specific guidance for applying it to language education research.

IPA is valuable for applied linguistics research as it offers a structured yet flexible approach to examining how individuals interpret language-related experiences. By focusing on participants' meaning-making within specific sociocultural and linguistic contexts, IPA supports in-depth exploration of how individuals reflect on and assign meaning to experiences such as language use, learning, and teaching. In the context of the doctoral study (Willis, 2023), this included how ESOL teachers made sense of their past AL learning and how those experiences informed their TK, teaching practices, and views on their professional positioning in the TESOL sector. IPA's interpretative and idiographic focus enables researchers to attend to the particularities of individual accounts and the patterns that emerge across them, offering insights into convergent and divergent meanings assigned to language-related experiences. Such context-sensitive interpretations may be overlooked by approaches that prioritize broader thematic patterns or generalizable outcomes.

Despite its many strengths, IPA is not without limitations. First, IPA's labor-intensive and time-consuming nature poses challenges, especially when working with larger datasets or complex research questions. The detailed, iterative analysis required to examine transcripts and identify PETs and GETs demands considerable time and effort. Second, although Smith et al. (2009, 2022) offer clear guidance for conducting IPA, the approach remains intentionally flexible rather than standardized. As is common in qualitative research, variations in data collection, analysis, and interpretation can occur across studies, which may complicate cross-study comparisons. While these limitations are inherent to the method, they can be mitigated through careful planning, rigorous documentation, and, as a potential innovation, greater reflexivity and transparency around researcher positionality to further enhance the credibility of IPA studies.

This paper is intended as a tutorial-style guide for applied linguistics researchers who wish to adopt IPA in their studies. While the focus here has been on illustrating IPA through a TESOL-related example incorporating both individual interviews and focus-group discussions, future research could expand this field-specific guidance to other areas of applied linguistics, such as language assessment, policy, or intercultural communication. Based on the strengths discussed, such as fostering collective meaning-making and reducing participants' sense of isolation, focus groups may be a particularly valuable data-collection method in IPA studies across these areas. Further studies could also adopt a more systematic approach to linguistic analysis. For instance, incorporating methods such as critical discourse analysis or conversation analysis into the second stage of step three could offer additional depth to the interpretative process. By offering step-by-step illustrations anchored in applied linguistics contexts, this paper aims to support postgraduate researchers, supervisors, and language educators engaging with qualitative inquiry in a more interpretative and context-sensitive way.

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Dr. Rohan K. Willis is an experienced TESOL educator who has taught in several Asian countries and New Zealand since 2002. His research focuses on language teacher knowledge, teacher perceptions, language teaching practices, plurilingualism, linguistic identities, and how personal, educational, and professional experiences shape ESOL teachers' professional roles.

Associate Professor Sharon Harvey has extensive experience in teaching English as a second and foreign language, applied linguistics, and ipre-service teacher education. Her research focuses on intercultural communication and competency, multilingualism and flexible languaging practices, language planning and policy, and refugee and migrant resettlement.