

# Negotiating Identities in Language Education: A Study of My English Learning and Teaching Journey

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In this article, I investigate the dynamic relationship between language ideologies and identity construction within English education in China. Reflecting on my journey as both an English learner and teacher, this study explores the ways in which standard language ideology and native-speakerism have influenced my self-perception and professional role. It narrates a journey from feeling linguistically inferior due to a Chinese accent to confronting professional biases in teaching. Furthermore, it shows a shift from internalizing standard English norms to embracing linguistic diversity. This study highlights the impact of language ideologies on my self-perception and professional identity in English language teaching, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of linguistic diversity and professional competence, beyond the native speaker paradigm.

The trend of promoting English education in China can be attributed to the growing recognition of the importance of English proficiency in the globalized world. Language education, including both language learning and teaching, has always been intertwined with the complex process of identity negotiation where identities are constructed and reshaped through social interaction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

I am aware that the construction of one's identity is not an isolated process, but rather a result of interactions with larger social forces that shape the ways in which individuals understand and express themselves (Vignoles et al., 2018). For English language learners and teachers, the task of navigating multiple identities in different linguistic and cultural contexts can be particularly challenging. Cultural and linguistic biases from linguistic ideologies can significantly influence individuals' perceptions of themselves and their language abilities (Zhang-Wu, 2022), leading to potential impacts on their language learning and teaching experiences. Therefore, I will take an auto-narrative approach to explore the process of my identities negotiation under both language standardization and native-speakerism. Specifically, I will examine how these ideas influenced my identity and self-positioning as an English language learner, and how they impacted my role as a language teacher. By using an auto-narrative approach, I can express my individual stance as part of a larger social group and link my personal encounters to the broader societal environment (Mirhosseini, 2018) that contributes towards a comprehensive analysis of the target phenomenon in society (Ferguson, 2009, as cited in Mirhosseini, 2018).

To gain a deeper understanding of my identity negotiation process, this article

will reflect on my personal journey as an English language learner and teacher. By deconstructing three influential episodes, I will examine how language ideology influenced my self-positioning as an inferior English language learner, and how it led to my being denied job opportunities and being perceived as a less competent Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) speaking teacher because of my first language (L1). I will then explore how I shifted from standard and native-speaker ideologies to an ideology based on the concept of variationism, which recognizes the value of linguistic diversity and variability. The insights gained from these explorations will reveal the complexity of identity negotiation in language learning and teaching contexts. By illuminating the impact of language ideology on my identity negotiation, this autoethnography aims to provide insights that will help others in similar situations.

### **The Lenses in My Episodes: Language Ideologies**

Since language is an activity that occurs within social contexts (Canagarajah, 2011), language ideologies are viewed to serve as a connection between theories of language and society (Piller, 2015). Employing language ideologies as the theoretical lens, I interpret my personal experiences to shed light on the complex relationship between my identity negotiation process and the larger social structures that are present in educational environments. It is recognized that language ideologies refer to individuals' beliefs about language (Piller, 2015) as well as the ways language beliefs are expressed and displayed in daily language usage (Yazan, 2019). Understanding the role of language ideologies in educational contexts is crucial for creating inclusive and effective language education environments. As language teachers and educators bring with them a set of language ideologies that inform their expectations and perceptions of what "good" language use looks like, who is considered a "legitimate" or "authentic" language user, and what language varieties are valued in different contexts. This influences students' values and ideologies about language since those constructs are impacted by the messages conveyed by teachers during classroom interaction (Yazan, 2019).

Under restrictive circumstances where prevailing language ideologies constrain users' identities, they are compelled to engage in identity negotiation (Darvin & Norton, 2015, as cited in Kim, 2017). Through the lens of identity negotiation, my understanding of language learning and teaching practices influenced by language ideologies was expanded. Identity options are constantly shaped by various factors, including dominant linguistic ideologies, institutional policies and practices, and social norms and expectations. In schools, both teachers and students are presented with a set of identity options that they can choose to adopt, negotiate, or resist (Yazan, 2019). Teachers' professional identities, for instance, may be influenced by the native-speakerism language ideology. Native-speakerism believes that native speakers are superior to non-native speakers in terms of linguistic competence and language teaching ability and thus creates a hierarchy between those who grew up speaking the target language as an L1 and those who learned it as a second language (L2). Under this ideology, others may misjudge teachers' teaching competencies and linguistic competencies based on their native-ness (Yazan, 2019).

In addition to the native-speakerism ideology, the standard language ideology

is also found to influence individuals' self-positioning by creating a sense of linguistic insecurity or inferiority for those who speak a non-standard dialect or accent of a named language. Positioning themselves in the Inner Circle of the English language (Kachru, 1992), native speakers of two dominant variations of English - US English and UK English - may hold a superior position of power and influence over other varieties of English. Under the influence of language standardization, learners may internalize the assumptions that there is a "correct" or "proper" way of speaking a language, which can create nervousness and self-doubt when their own language use is deemed "incorrect" or "non-standard." This can impact learners' sense of identity as language users, as they may feel that their way of speaking is not valued or respected in the target language community. Therefore, it is necessary to address the interplay between the above mentioned linguistic ideologies and learners/teachers' identity negotiation processes.

## **Literature Review**

### **Language Ideologies and Identity Negotiation**

Language is a multifaceted concept that extends beyond its basic function as a tool for communication. While the social context in which language is used affects how people understand and interpret linguistic expressions, ideological factors influence how people view language and its roles in society (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). Language ideology plays a significant role in shaping learners' and teachers' self-positionings and identities, as ideologies influence how individuals view themselves in relation to the language they are learning or teaching. In the context of language learning, Pan's (2019) study found that Chinese university students hold complex and ambivalent language ideologies towards Chinese English, influenced primarily by the language ideologies embedded within their social and cultural experiences. While most of the participants in this study were found to view Chinese English positively for its cultural features, they personally perceived their use of Chinese English as linguistically deficient and a source of embarrassment. This reflects how they experience tensions regarding the acceptance of China English that embodies Chinese cultural identity within the English language. This suggests that learners' identities in language learning contexts are not fixed or predetermined, but rather are dynamic and subject to change in response to various social and cultural factors, including language ideologies. Similarly, Kroskrity (2000) also suggests that language ideology plays a significant role in shaping individual identity, as it influences an individual's preferences for language use and language maintenance.

### **Native-Speakerism in ELT**

One of the dominant language ideologies in the English language teaching (ELT) context is the native-speakerism ideology. The concept of native speaker refers to someone who has acquired a particular language as their L1. In many ELT cases, teachers are perceived and treated differently based on their (non)native-speaker identities (Liu, 2021; Yazan, 2019; Fang, 2018) regardless of their teaching competence. The continuity of discriminatory practices indicates inequality

in the ELT job markets, especially in China. For instance, language program administrators in Liu (2021) favored native English teachers (NETs) and regarded “nativeness” as the most important factor in hiring language teachers, thus using native-speakerism ideology to justify themselves. Similarly, Fang (2018) revealed that NETs receive higher pay than non-native English teachers (NNETs) yet are required to have less Key Performance Indicator (KPI) to get job promotions in China, which reflected the ideology of native-speaker superiority. As a NNET in China, I use the episodes in my autoethnography to explore the challenges I face in negotiating my professional identities in contexts where native-speakerism is prevalent, which can shed light on the ways in which native-speakerism can lead to feelings of inferiority, self-doubt, and a lack of confidence in one’s teaching abilities.

Additionally, within the community of native English speakers, a hierarchical structure can be observed based on factors such as dialect and accent. For instance, speakers of British English and American English are often perceived as adhering to Standard English, which consequently grants them a higher status compared to speakers of other English varieties, such as Indian English. Furthermore, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), despite being spoken by native English speakers, is often regarded as an “inferior” form of English in the United States. This phenomenon can be attributed to the influence of the ideology of language standardization, which can lead to biases that view racialized bodies as linguistically deficient (Flores & Rosa, 2015), which perpetuates linguistic hierarchies and reinforces social inequalities.

### **Standard English in China**

The dominance of the standard language ideology in the Chinese educational context has been widely discussed in the literature. Specifically, the Standard English ideology has been identified as a dominant language ideology that influences language learning and identity formation (Wang et al., 2020). This is evident in studies such as Pan (2019), which found that students who do not speak standard English may perceive themselves as linguistically inferior, suggesting that they may internalize feelings of shame about their language use.

The presence of standard language ideology in English language textbooks has been the focus of growing scholarly interest. While textbooks are primarily designed to impart language skills, they also contain underlying ideological messages that can influence learners’ beliefs and self-perception (Gray, 2002). For example, Zhang and Song’s (2022) study on an English language textbook used in China found that the textbook prioritized British and American English varieties, perpetuating linguistic imperialism that imposes dominant English varieties and cultures on other varieties of English in the context of ESL teaching/learning in China. This not only enforces the idea of a singular “correct” English but overlooks the legitimacy of other English varieties, such as those used in Canada, Singapore, New Zealand, and Australia.

Another study by Ning and Stephen (2022) also examined the presence of standard language ideology in China’s foreign language education policies, that highly value the standard form of a language. As a result, a linguistic hierarchy that favors certain ways of speaking over others was perpetuated in the educational

environments in China, marginalizing dialects and accents that don't adhere to the standard.

By analyzing three key episodes from my life, I hope to explore and answer the question: What is the interplay between language ideologies and my identity negotiation and self-positioning as an English language learner and teacher?

### **An Analysis of Three Episodes from My Life**

#### **Speaking English with a Chinese accent: The Struggle of Acceptance**

All contents in English textbooks in China are US or UK versions of English, which contributed to the ideological views that only US/UK English is the standard English. When I was in high school, my parents who were adamant that I learned the so-called "proper" accent, paid more for speaking classes taught by native speakers because they told me that only NETs could teach authentic and communicative English. As a result, I was misinformed that NETs were better English teachers than NNETs.

Then, I was enrolled in speaking classes that were taught by a native speaker of English from the UK. In these classes, my pronunciation, heavily influenced by my Chinese accent, was persistently corrected by my teachers. Even though I was already a fluent English speaker, I remembered being told by my teacher that I was speaking Chinese-accented English instead of good and standard English, which made me consider the necessity to learn how to speak standard US/UK English in order to be accepted by native speakers.

The constant corrections and emphasis on standard English accents wore on my self-esteem. I began to internalize and accept the belief that my Chinese-accented English was a sign of inferiority or incompetence in the English language as Pan (2019) suggested. My unique blend of English and Chinese became something I sought to suppress in order to fit into the classes taught by native English speakers from the UK. This led to a conflict within myself as I struggled to negotiate my identity with the ideological expectations placed on me by my family and educational environment. The more I tried to adapt my speech to the standard English accent, the more I positioned myself as an inferior speaker of English who was unconfident and couldn't claim ownership over the language (Pennycook, 1996).

In my pursuit of linguistic conformity, the message I received was that I was making errors in the target language if I didn't commit to the US/UK standards. My English proficiency was regarded as poor simply because I had an accent that didn't meet the so-called standard form. I was compelled to face the underlying ideological beliefs that led to the marginalization and discrimination of individuals who spoke English in different ways, placing them in a hierarchical order (Wiley & Lukes, 1996), although I didn't question the value of linguistic homogeneity then.

#### **Being Positioned as a Less Competent Language Teacher**

After I graduated from high school, I was admitted into the English Language and Literature Program at a reputable college in China. Following my achievement of a high score on the TOEFL examination and the acquisition of a Teacher



Qualification Certificate (TQC), I sought employment as a TOEFL speaking instructor during the summer of my senior year so that I would be able to cover part of my tuition for my upcoming master's study. I submitted my curriculum vitae to one of China's largest organizations specializing in TOEFL and IELTS preparation via email and was granted an in-person interview to further discuss potential employment opportunities with the manager.

At the beginning of the interview, the manager told me that all the teachers who taught TOEFL or IELTS speaking were NETs from the US and the UK. He explained that students and their parents generally perceived native speakers as teachers who possess superior speaking abilities compared to non-native speakers. As a result, they preferred enrolling in speaking courses facilitated by native speakers. Then, I was recommended to teach TOEFL reading or writing instead by the manager, as local Chinese teachers were typically more highly regarded in the domains of grammar and vocabulary instruction.

While it seemed reasonable that my application for a TOEFL speaking instructor position was declined due to my limited teaching experience in the field, the underlying message conveyed by the manager prompted me to reflect on the prevailing ideology of native-speakerism for the first time. It seemed that NETs were always inherently capable of teaching more accurate (Fang, 2018) and better English regardless of their teaching and pedagogical competence. Rather than being assessed based on my professional capacities and teaching skills, the message sent to me was that my teaching abilities in TOEFL speaking were disregarded on account of my non-native speaker status. Despite having achieved a high TOEFL score, having undergone education in English language and literature, and possessing a teaching certificate, my linguistic identity as a non-native speaker of English, which was fixed and invariable, rendered me a less competent TOEFL speaking teacher. Similar to the findings of Liu (2021), which revealed that nativeness was a key factor in the preference for NETs, L1 linguistic identity appeared to bestow value upon native speakers in their professional capacities.

In addition to the (non)nativeness factor, the varieties of English spoken by the teachers were also categorized in a hierarchical order. As the manager mentioned, only NETs who spoke US/UK English were granted the job to teach Spoken English in that organization, which sent the message that NETs who spoke other varieties of English such as Indian English or Australian English were not considered to meet the qualification to teach spoken English, not to mention my Chinese-accented English. The information conveyed by the manager made me reconsider the inequality I experienced which was not only affected by native-speakerism ideology but also standard English ideology.

### **Shifting Perspectives**

I was admitted into the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education (Penn GSE) the next year and started my study there in Fall 2022. As a non-native English speaker, this marked my first time studying in an English-speaking country, which I initially found both exciting and daunting. My previous experience of being denied a job opportunity in China due to my L1 had led me to believe that the majority of the professors in the TESOL program, which is centered

around teaching English, would be native speakers of the language.

However, upon starting the program, I was pleasantly surprised to find that there were professors hailing from countries such as Japan and Korea who did not use English as their L1. It was a quiet revelation that began to chip away at my old beliefs. Here, what mattered wasn't where you were from or what language you grew up speaking. This prompted me to re-evaluate my preconceived notions about language teaching, which helped me realize that a teacher's L1 background need not be the most prominent factor, as was the case in my past experience in China. Instead, I found that a teacher's teaching competence and academic ability were considered far more important than their (non)nativeness at Penn GSE. As a result, I gradually shifted my focus from my linguistic identity to my professional identity, striving to improve my teaching skills and broaden my academic knowledge.

As the semester unfolded, my internal battle with my Chinese accent entered the center stage. There I sat, my heart thumping slightly faster than usual, palms slightly damp. Each class felt like stepping onto a stage, my voice under a spotlight—not for what I said, but for how it sounded. My Chinese accent, a vivid marker of my identity, seemed to loom larger than my ideas, clouding the perception of my contributions. I found myself wishing I could hide it and replace it with an American accent. Then came a day that would etch itself into my memory. The classroom fell silent as a teacher, not a native English speaker either, stood in front of us all and told us she knew she had an accent when she spoke English, and she loved her accent. That simple declaration hit me hard, piercing through the fog of my self-doubt. It echoed the confidence I saw in classmates from India, Singapore, Vietnam, who owned their accents, each adding a unique color to the English language. I was inspired to tentatively start to embrace my Chinese-accented English and the unique identity it represented. However, the transition was far from straightforward.

It was a gradual process made up of countless moments. Initially, I found myself envying the ease with which my peers seemed to accept their linguistic idiosyncrasies. Each time I spoke up in class, a part of me braced for judgment based on my pronunciation, not the content of my speech. It was a struggle to shake off years of internalized beliefs that equated accent with proficiency. Speaking in class, once a mere act of academic necessity, evolved into an act of personal bravery. Each word I spoke felt like a step forward on uneven terrain, my voice trembling not just with nervousness but with the weight of exposing myself. My accent, once a shackle, now laid bare my journey and my identity. And yet, the expected judgment never came. Instead, each nod of understanding from my NNETs as well as each spark of discussion with classmates, where ideas flowed freely, untethered by the accents that carried them, marked my journey. Slowly, the dense forest of doubt began to clear, revealing a landscape where my accent was no longer a barrier but a bridge, connecting me to my unique story and to the voices around me.

Although my journey towards embracing my accent was marked by progress, it wasn't without its setbacks. Doubts and insecurities occasionally resurfaced, challenging my newfound confidence. There were days when the familiar weight of apprehension settled back over my shoulders, moments when the fear of not being understood, or worse, being judged, made my heart race just a bit faster

before speaking up. Yet, I learned to appreciate the beauty and legitimacy of all varieties of English and the unique identities they reflected, including my own, understanding that no accent is inherently superior or inferior to another. This journey heightened my awareness of the diversity within the English language (Rajprasis, 2023) and helped me foster a more positive attitude toward non-standard accents and varieties of English, seeing “non-standard” accents not as deviations to be corrected but as integral threads in linguistic diversity. This shift in perspective was an experience that enriched my understanding of the unique identities that our languages and accents reveal.

### Conclusion

Through my autoethnographic analysis, I explore the impact of standard language ideology and native-speakerism on my self-positioning and identity negotiation as an English language learner and teacher. First and foremost, I examined how the standard language ideology influenced my self-positioning as an inferior speaker of English due to my Chinese accent. By recognizing the limitations of this perspective, I was able to shift my mindset and embrace the unique identity reflected in my accent, ultimately promoting greater inclusivity and appreciation for linguistic diversity. Furthermore, by challenging native-speakerism ideology in ELT, I was able to focus on my professional identity, proving that one’s (non-)nativeness does not dictate their professional teaching competence as an English language teacher. This stereotype of teachers’ language background should be addressed in teacher training and hiring systems. Additionally, I recounted the transformation in my self-positioning from a non-standard speaker of English and a less competent language teacher to one that embraces my L1 linguistic identity and accent. By letting go of the constraints imposed by the two ideologies, I was able to grow professionally and personally, fostering a more inclusive and empowering approach in the educational context.

In conclusion, my analysis highlights the need for greater awareness and critical examination of the standard language ideology and native-speakerism ideology in the field. As my analysis shows, the two ideologies are often inseparable. The standard language ideology may be found together with the native-speakerism ideology in one’s identity negotiation process. Challenging these ideologies not only empowers different speakers of English who are from diverse cultural backgrounds with their unique accents, but also fosters a more inclusive and diverse learning environment that values the experiences of both NNETs and NETs. By embracing linguistic diversity and focusing on professional development, we can work towards dismantling these limiting ideological perspectives and creating a more equitable society.

*As a TESOL student at Penn GSE, I am deeply passionate about language education. My focus is on innovative teaching methodologies and exploring the intersections of culture and language learning. Committed to fostering inclusive and effective language education, I am dedicated to making a meaningful difference in the field of language education.*



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