

# Questioning the Native Speaker Construct in Teacher Education

Enabling Multilingual Identities and  
Decolonial Language Pedagogies

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## Concluding thoughts

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# Concluding thoughts

## Destabilising fixed identities

Inspired by Judith Butler's 'intellectual promiscuity' (1990), this book has taken a multidisciplinary approach to questioning the 'native speaker' construct in teacher education. Directed at dismantling fixed conceptions of gender identity, Butler's 'impure' crossing of disciplinary and geographical boundaries helped to examine presuppositions concerning gender and the constitution of the subject, foregrounding 'performativity' and the role of agency in identity construction. The use of the term 'promiscuous' is already performative in itself, alluding to the sexism embedded in language and the 'impure' nature of the theories put forward, which are constantly open to contamination and re-appropriation by other ways of thinking (Childers et al., 2015). Departing from conventional approaches to feminism, Butler's seminal work destabilises and disrupts traditional understandings of gender, opening up new possibilities for thinking about identity, power, and resistance. Her questioning of the binary conception of gender as strictly male or female is particularly pertinent to debates concerning native speakerism. The binary constructs of 'native' versus 'non-native' have pushed forward critical lines of research aimed at empowering those marginalised ('non-natives') by dominant discourse, in a similar way to the achievements brought about by early feminism in relation to women's rights. Nevertheless, and as highlighted by recent work (Menard-Warwick et al., 2008; Selvi et al., 2024), the juxtaposing of mutually exclusive categories of identity risks essentialising these identities and concealing their historically constructed nature. The discussions presented throughout this book have aimed to foreground the ideological character of the 'native speaker' construct, promoting critical thinking about identity, power, and resistance in teacher education.

Teacher education is widely regarded as a site that has the potential to transform received beliefs about language teacher identities and language teaching practice. Selvi et al. (2024) considers this site as an 'intellectual bridge' between scholarship and the ongoing endeavour to support constructive teacher development. This enabling vision of teacher education underpins the structure of this book, presenting theoretical frameworks that can be transformed into

strategic actions in teacher education. While conscious that teacher education alone cannot ‘change the world’, I recognise its potential to transform mindsets and destabilise the fixed categories on which systemic inequalities are built and sustained. Such transformations come about through engaging in the kind of strategic questioning which has been another key element of this book. I would like to conclude by returning to these key questions and considering the main findings of each chapter.

### Questioning the native speaker construct

*Is there a connection between teacher self-efficacy and beliefs about the native speaker ideal? How do these beliefs impact on teacher wellbeing?*

Findings from Chapter 1 suggested a strong connection between teacher self-efficacy beliefs and conceptions of the native speaker ideal. Self-efficacy is shown to be affected negatively when teachers compare themselves to an ‘ideal’ which is entirely out of their reach and has little relevance to their own roles. These beliefs are shown to have a detrimental effect on teacher wellbeing, sometimes pushing competent individuals to leave the profession, as also detected in relation to the tensions generated by the imposition of monolingual ideologies, as discussed in Chapter 3. Focusing on the detrimental effect of the ‘native speaker’ ideal on individuals could be interpreted as a ‘myopic’ exercise in individualism which ignores broader social-political questions (see Selvi et al., 2024). However, discussions in Chapter 1 emphasised the interconnectedness of individuals and their wider communities, suggesting that improvements in individual teacher wellbeing can lead to more active advocacy for systemic change in institutions. The need for a specific focus on self-care and intra-personal skills in teacher education was emphasised further in Chapter 6. In the first instance, and going beyond the specific focus on self-efficacy and wellbeing, self-care is considered crucial to avoid despondency in a rapidly changing world and in view of the unprecedented climate crisis facing humanity (UNDP, 2022; Libertson, 2023). In the second instance, it is considered to be a fundamental condition for being able to engage in the kind of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) that encourages individuals to focus on their strengths, as opposed to dwelling on their supposed ‘deficiencies’ (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020), or factors that are outside their reach (being ‘native’ if they are ‘non-native’). Promoting AI in language teacher education can be transformative, providing teachers with the tools needed to adopt more constructive self-beliefs themselves and to encourage them in their students.

*To what extent should teachers share their own personal language learning experiences in the classroom? How can their own stories help foster multilingual identities and multilingual wellbeing?*

The discussions developed in Chapter 2 highlighted the benefits of sharing personal language learning experiences in the classroom. When teachers open

up this space, the result is not only beneficial for their students, but can also help teachers themselves to further consolidate their own ongoing process of identity construction. Crucial to this process is the questioning of deficit perspectives that impede positive identity construction and generate low expectations in formal education (Cummins, 2001). Chapter 7 expanded on these points further, highlighting the need to consider the existing knowledge and customs that learners and teachers bring to the classroom (Esteban-Guitart, 2023; Waddington & Esteban-Guitart, 2024). Knowledge of other languages is often ignored in formal education settings (Little, 2020), contributing to deficit perspectives which focus only on competences in the dominant or ‘native’ language of the classroom, missing valuable opportunities for incorporating knowledge about multiple languages and cultures. Exploring myths about heritage or home languages can help challenge common misconceptions, generating more appreciative attitudes which value *all* languages as a valuable source of knowledge and a basis for further learning and development. In terms of identity construction, identifying as multilingual proves to be an essential turning point, refusing the fixed and exclusive binary conception of ‘native’ versus ‘non-native’ speaker of one language, and conceiving oneself and others affirmatively as ongoing learners of multiple languages. This affirmative turning point can be encouraged through the kinds of activities illustrated in Chapter 7, with identity texts prompting deep reflection and active agency in the construction of individual multilingual identities, while also fostering group cohesion by increasing awareness and visibility of the diverse languages within it (Ibrahim, 2022). From this perspective, conceptions of fixed language identity are destabilised, with an emphasis on potentiality and future projection enabling individuals to redefine their identities beyond normative constraints.

*To what extent can translanguaging challenge dominant monolingual teaching ideologies?*

In Chapter 3, we saw how dominant monolingual teaching ideologies positioned both learners and teachers in a perpetual position of deficiency in contrast to the ‘idealised native’ speaker, conceptualised as the ultimate goal of language learning. Inclusive translanguaging strategies contributed to challenging this dominant ideology, creating more inclusive learning environments in which students and teachers were able to draw on their full linguistic repertoires and in which learners were repositioned as emerging bilinguals. Observed within a forced monolingual setting, findings highlighted the resistance and resilience of local teachers, while also recognising the tensions that emerge when teachers’ experience-based knowledge clashes with top-down policy mandates. Although uses of translanguaging strategies of inclusion revealed pockets of resistance, this use intersected with practices of exclusion, fuelled by the underlying guilt, lack of confidence, and fear (of losing jobs) generated by the government-mandated monolingual policy. The activities

proposed in Chapter 8 explored attitudes and beliefs about L1 use in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings. These activities came with a proviso for teacher educators to bear in mind local policies and beliefs, preparing future teachers for the realities and expectations of their local educational communities. Notwithstanding these realities, Rabbidge (2019) considers it vital to provide students with counter discourses to expose the ideological nature of what have come to be seen as ‘truths’ (‘L1 exclusion is in the best interest of language learners’, ‘native speakers who don’t speak the L1 are the best teacher models’), contemplating different ways of interpreting their realities and conceiving their own identities. This contemplation can lead to a recognition of the way in which dominant ideology has interpellated them (Althusser, 1994) in a negative identity position (as *non*-native teachers) and a realisation that they can assume other positions (bilingual/multilingual teacher) which do not situate them on the negative side of an antagonistic relationship. Considering the wider sociopolitical context, Chapter 8 explored translanguaging as a transformative endeavour which can disrupt dominant ideologies and linguistic hierarchies (Sánchez & García, 2022), allowing for the expression of lived realities and the creation of inclusive spaces.

*How can a raciolinguistic perspective contribute to debates about native speakerism? Can we teach ourselves out of oppression?*

Rather than simply contributing to debates about native speakerism, findings from Chapter 4 suggested that native speakerism cannot be explained or understood *without* applying a raciolinguistic perspective, since the ‘native’ versus ‘non-native’ dichotomy emerged within colonial logics which a raciolinguistic perspective sets out to interrogate and dismantle (Cushing, 2023). Applying this perspective has helped show how the ‘ideal native speaker’ is rooted in processes of nation-state construction, according to which nativeness comes to be associated with notions of ‘purity’, ‘true citizenship’, and belonging. Far from being a mere linguistic category, we considered how the term ‘ideal native speaker’ is loaded with racial connotations which position racialised speakers as imposters and deficient users of language, seriously affecting their job prospects and life experiences. Activities in Chapter 9 aimed to expose the ‘White listening subject’ and raise awareness of the assumptions and prejudices linking skin colour with nativeness. Focusing on the intersections between race and class, activities also aimed to expose accent discrimination and debate the case for legislating against ‘glottophobia’, following recent movements to conceive it as a punishable form of discrimination. The question of whether we can teach ourselves out of oppression emerged from Ramjattan’s (2019) work exposing racial discrimination and acquired a dual focus related to the subject (‘we’) of the question and the limitations of individual advocacy efforts. Regarding the latter, discussions pointed to the need to develop a public pedagogy within the English language teaching (ELT) sector to end the oppression and discrimination that racialised teachers have been

subjected to, and to acknowledge and challenge the way in which other categories of social differentiation intersect with and exacerbate racial discrimination. Regarding the subject, the ‘we’ alluded to a collective that goes beyond affiliation or solidarity according to skin colour, interpellating all professionals to challenge and dismantle the oppressive ideologies that have permeated the sector and the wider society to which it belongs.

*To what extent is ‘nativelikeness’ deployed as a motivational driver? Are such uses of the construct necessarily at odds with movements promoting social justice?*

Despite the growing body of research and activism problematising the term ‘native’ in language education, or actively calling for it to be replaced by less loaded terminology (see Dewaele, 2018; de Oliveira, 2019; Dewaele et al., 2021), the term continues to be used by the general population, as well as in language learning and teaching. Chapter 5 explored this question in detail by considering how ‘nativelikeness’ is deployed as a motivational driver (Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos, 2022) and whether this is necessarily at odds with movements promoting social justice. One of the key points that emerged from this exploration was the need to distinguish carefully between the native speaker as ‘myth’ or ‘reality’ (Davies, 2003), contrasting conceptions of the native speaker as mythical upholder of linguistic standards (the idealised native speaker) with the reality of speakers of specific variations of the language. Activities presented in Chapter 10 proposed strategies within teacher education to promote awareness of linguistic variety and to challenge conceptions of what constitutes a ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ accent. Understanding the distinction between the myth and reality of the native speaker was considered crucial to appreciate the damage done by the former, while recognising that some learners achieve a level of language proficiency comparable to speakers of specific variations of the language. In the real cases of exceptional learners presented by Mentzelopoulos and Dörnyei (2022), aspiring to become ‘nativelike’ differed from the abstract goal of speaking like an ‘ideal native’ speaker (see Chapter 3) and was motivated by the learners’ desire to fit into ‘normal life’ by speaking like the members of the new communities they were living in. Far from reinforcing ‘nativelikness’ as the ultimate goal of language learning, Dörnyei and Mentzelopoulos’s (2022) exploration of these cases represents a vindication of the rights of those who are motivated by it, as well as a reminder of the performative nature of language and the agentic component of language learning. The question of wanting to ‘blend in’ was discussed at length in Chapter 5, considering the complexities of ‘assimilative motivation’. Concerns regarding loss of identity or renouncement were contrasted with notions of expanding identities that align with the conceptions of multilingual identities discussed in Chapter 2. Finally, and drawing on perspectives from contemporary critical theory

(Butler, 2000; Kelz, 2016), Chapter 10 proposed activities to build awareness of the relational character of subjectivity, encouraging an openness to the ‘Other’ and a recognition of our own ‘Otherness’, considered as a necessary step to destabilise the colonial thinking discussed throughout the book and reconceive our identities as fluid and contingent on our relationship with others and the world we inhabit.

### **Scholarly civility and ongoing dialogue**

Considering the last question addressed above, I interpret Dörnyei and Mentzelopoulos’s (2022) work as a vindication of the rights of those who are motivated by the concept of ‘nativeness’. I extend this vindication to the rights of those who use the terms ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ without any malintent. While questioning the native speaker construct throughout, this book has also recognised that it cannot simply be eradicated from public discourse, in the same way that destabilising fixed notions of gender has not resulted in an eradication of the terms ‘woman’ and ‘man’. Ongoing debates within academic and professional settings need to be conducted in accordance with the kind of ‘scholarly civility’ called for by Isaacs (2022), considering the native speaker construct in all its complexities and resisting any tendency to disparage those who use the associated terms in good faith. Conducting his study with international teaching assistants, Ramjattan (2019) was faced with the dilemma of having to use terminology he found problematic (‘Do you speak English with a foreign accent?’). Although feeling conflicted by the terminology, he recognised that its use was pragmatic, since he was not reaching out to language specialists and needed to choose a term that would be recognisable for a lot of people (see Chapter 4). This measured use of terminology suggests a grounded approach which refuses to impose academic language/thinking on people outside academia. This approach is crucial to avoid reinforcing hierarchical relations of power (the ‘enlightened academic speaker’ versus ‘ignorant populace’) and the kind of antagonistic relations that have been interrogated throughout this book.

As a concept, ‘nativeness’ is evoked in different languages. This book has concentrated on the construct largely within the context of English language teaching, while making some references to dominant hegemonic processes in other languages, such as French (see Chapters 4 and 9) and Japanese (see Chapter 3). Contemporary scholars are increasingly recognising the importance of examining native speakerism in other languages and other language teaching contexts. Probing for what they refer to as a ‘post-native-speakerist future’, Houghton and Hashimoto (2018) explore the nature of English and Japanese native speakerism in the Japanese context. Turning the focus to students, Edstrom (2007) considers the changing landscape of Spanish language courses in which the mixing of ‘non-native’, heritage, and ‘native speaker’ students presents unique challenges and benefits for both students and teachers.

Further research developing these lines of inquiry will contribute to a broader understanding of language ideologies, power dynamics, and social inequalities within diverse linguistic landscapes.

Selvi et al. (2024) conclude their exhaustive literature review of research on ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ English-speaking teachers on a note of critical ambivalence. Looking back optimistically, they appreciate the vast body of research that has helped expose ideologies and discourses that underpin structural inequalities and systemic racism, and recognise the significant impact this has had in terms of confronting and ultimately transforming such ideologies. Looking back pessimistically, they lament the fact that much theorising has inadvertently essentialised identity categories, leaving underlying ideologies intact, and express deep concern about the potential for transformation in view of the bleak sociopolitical climate of today’s world, in which ‘the maintenance of national order and security through beliefs, discourses, policies, and practices of homogeneity operating at the levels of race, ethnicity, gender, and language (e.g., Lee & Jang, 2022) is not only incompatible with the multilingual and multicultural realities of today’s world but also foments the ongoing waves of xenophobia, racism, intolerance, and discrimination’ (Selvi et al., 2024). Sharing this critical ambivalence, this book has attempted to expose language ideologies and social inequalities, while remaining acutely aware of the limited impact that research can have if it remains confined to academia. By extending theoretical frameworks into practical applications that can be deployed in teacher education, my intention has been to stimulate activism at a grassroots level, disrupting homogeneous practices and destabilising fixed identity categories. As announced already in the Introduction, destabilising these categories is a first step towards challenging inequalities, advocating not only for a more socially just profession but for a more socially just world. Encouraging ongoing debate within the teaching profession can help destabilise existing norms, prompting teachers and students to reimagine alternative ways of being and relating to each other.

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