

# Identity and the Ownership of English

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## Framing the Issue

Debates on the ownership of a language are best understood through an analysis of the social relations of power in a given community, from the interaction between two people in a local site to global engagements between nation-states. While such debates pertain to all languages, they are particularly salient with respect to English because of its power on the world stage, its diverse uses and users, and the opportunities it provides for those who can speak, read, and write it, both online and offline. As a result, the central issue that frames debates on the ownership of English is that of identity. Which identities are made available to those who use English, whether native or non-native speaker? Further, to what extent does the particular version or form of English used by a speaker or writer expand or limit possibilities for the user? The issue of identity arises from the recognition that language is both a linguistic system as well as a social practice in which identities are forged, imagined, negotiated, and sometimes resisted.

The conceptualization of language as both a linguistic system and a social practice has been convincingly articulated by Bourdieu, the French social theorist whose constructs of “legitimate language” and the “legitimate speaker” provide important insights into debates on identity and the ownership of English. What and who is considered “legitimate” must be understood with respect to a given “field” or social context that is often characterized by unequal struggles for meaning, access, and power. When English teachers, whether native or non-native, interact with students, they are also negotiating who they are and how they relate to the world at a given time and place. For example, qualified non-native English teachers in Uganda, Brazil, or Bangladesh might be considered highly valued “legitimate” English teachers in each of these contexts. However, if the teachers were to move to a country in which, for example, their variety of English, accent, race, or nationality were not valued, their legitimacy as both speakers and teachers of English might be compromised, and they would likely undergo profound shifts of identity.

While such shifts of identity, for both teachers and students, might usually be associated with transitions from countries in which English is taught, or in what

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Kachru has called “the expanding” or “outer circle,” to countries of the “inner circle,” these transitions can actually occur in multiple directions, i.e., from the inner to the outer circle, with equally disruptive identity shifts. Early and Norton (2012, p. 195), for example, describe an e-mail they received from a newly graduated Ugandan student who had spent a year with her husband and two young boys in Vancouver, Canada. After the family returned to Uganda, the former student wrote about how teachers complained that the two boys “have gone with a style they are calling Western” and “have an accent that they do not hear”; the boys, on the other hand, said that their teachers “speak English upside down.” One son, Paul, talked to the teacher in class whenever he wanted to, and this had become an issue because in the Ugandan classroom, “children are expected first to listen to the teacher and talk when the teacher asks them.” For young Paul, English as a linguistic system and a social practice was being renegotiated in the Ugandan context. If Paul was to be accorded the identity of a successful student, he needed to adjust to the variety of English considered legitimate in his Ugandan school, and he needed to adopt the classroom practices expected of young learners in this context.

### Making the Case

Research and debate on the ownership of English, particularly in the field of TESOL, are an important topic in the *TESOL Quarterly* and other journals in language education and applied linguistics. More than two decades ago, a key 1993 TESOL plenary by Widdowson had the topic “The ownership of English,” while in 1997, identity and the ownership of English was the subject of a special issue of the *TESOL Quarterly* (Norton, 1997). Classic monographs at the time, which sought to influence debates on the ownership of English, included those of Kachru, Phillipson, and Pennycook, all of whom sought to promote debate on English as a global resource, and not the exclusive property of native speakers of the language.

It is evident from more recent publications that debates on the ownership of English have shifted dramatically to a focus on multilingualism and transnationalism, and that, in the applied linguistics literature, at least, there is increasing interest in English as a lingua franca, and its implications for identity. Also interesting are perspectives from critical sociolinguists like Makoni and Pennycook, who challenge the concept of languages as having “fixed” boundaries. At the same time, however, alongside the contemporary literature on translanguaging, there are powerful language testing and publishing industries, for whom the standard English of native speakers is the most desirable form of English, and whose practices determine the life chances of millions of English speakers, both native and non-native, worldwide.

Since this volume addresses the non-native English speaking teacher (NNEST) specifically, of central interest is the way in which current debates on identity and the ownership of English have impacted the identity of the NNEST. How should NNESTs navigate this complex terrain? Selvi (2014) discusses how the use of the

label NNEST itself constructs an identity defined by being Other (non) to a standard (native). While the label acknowledges the existence of a periphery, it can also perpetuate the marginalization of the accents, professional qualities, and competencies of speakers whose first language is not English, thus promoting “native speakerism.” In a state-of-the-art article, Moussu and Llorca (2008) point out how every language user is a native speaker of a language, and that the NNEST label itself reflects Anglo-centrism. Cheung, Said, and Park’s (2015) volume on language teacher identity examines how the disempowering discourses of NS superiority can shape feelings of inadequacy and professional illegitimacy among NNESTs. While the binary debates of the 1990s between NS and NNS have become more nuanced and textured, there is still much to address, especially as debates on legitimacy and ownership in English teaching worldwide intersect with race and ethnicity.

### Pedagogical Implications

Research on identity and the ownership of English in the context of debates on non-native English teachers demands innovative approaches to classroom pedagogy, teacher education, and language policy, as well as theories of language teacher identity. In Darwin and Norton’s (2015) model of investment, the positioning of identities is implicated in ideology: the NNEST is positioned not only by ideological structures that maintain NS privilege, but also by NNESTs themselves who struggle with ideological notions of language ownership. It is by claiming the identity of a bilingual/multilingual teacher, equipped with diverse linguistic capital, that NNESTs can assert their professional legitimacy and value. More recent research also suggests that it is more productive to focus on classroom practices and student learning than the native tongue of the English teacher. In other words, does the English teacher, whether native or non-native, develop classroom practices that promote student ownership of the English language and enhance the range of identities available to language learners? To the extent that English language learners are invested in the teacher’s pedagogy and classroom practices, the legitimacy of the English teacher will be enhanced, whether the teacher is native or non-native.

The following examples, drawn from research with English language learners and teachers in Mexico, Hong Kong, Chile, and the United States, are illustrative of the ways in which English teachers, both native and non-native, have developed classroom practices that enhance learner investment in the English language, promote student ownership of English, and expand the range of identities available to both learners and teachers. The construct of “investment,” developed as a sociological complement to the psychological construct of motivation (Norton, 2013; Darwin & Norton, 2015) signals language learners’ desire and commitment to engage in the practices of the target language, given their multiple identities and hopes for the future.

Drawing on research with three non-native English teachers in Oaxaca, Mexico, Sayer (2012) provides a vivid account of the practices adopted by these teachers as

they sought greater legitimacy in their classrooms and communities. One teacher, Carlos, for example, made highly innovative use of role play in the classroom, providing learners with the opportunity to experiment with a variety of English speaker identities in the classroom's "Black Horse Restaurant." Although the students forgot some of the vocabulary and struggled with some grammatical expressions, Carlos noted that the students "really got into it" (p. 48) and sought to apply in practice what they had learnt in theory. Sayer notes that the three teachers' engagements with English did not simply comprise their competence at manipulating the linguistic forms of English, but rather evoked "their whole biographical history with the language" (p. 79), such as opportunities to travel outside Mexico. The teachers' knowledge of English as both a linguistic system and a social practice was implicated in their perceived legitimacy as English teachers.

In Hong Kong, Hafner (2014) describes a compelling study in which university students incorporated digital literacy into their learning of scientific English. Students were required to develop a project in which they conducted a simple scientific experiment and then reported their findings in two formats—one as a multimodal scientific documentary shared on YouTube for an audience of non-specialists, and another as a written lab report for an audience of specialists. Hafner provides convincing evidence that the students were highly invested in these pedagogical practices, and combined a range of modes to develop the appropriate identities with which to engage the general, non-specialist audience. What Hafner, drawing on Ivanič, calls "discoursal identities" ranged from that of scientist and investigative journalist to that of curious traveler. Each of these identities indexed different purposes, from educating the audience to entertaining it, and the students needed to harness diverse semiotic modes, including image and sound, to achieve the desired effects. Like the students in Carlos' classroom in Mexico, the Hong Kong students had the opportunity to experiment with different English language identities, and were highly invested in classroom practices, irrespective of the native language of the classroom teacher.

Drawing on digital innovations in a very different context, the research of Menard-Warwick, Heredia-Herrera, and Palmer (2013) on teacher identity and online pedagogy in Chile and the United States, illustrates the ways in which both native and non-native English teachers can navigate distinct relationships to the English language in ways that are productive. In an online Internet chat exchange between prospective teachers studying English in Chile and Californian graduate students who served as tutors, the researchers found that it was not the native language of the tutor that led to differences in online discussion, but rather a given tutor's particular orientation to cultural issues. One NNS tutor, Eugenia, for example, had a more global orientation to educational and political issues, while the NS tutor, Dionne, had a more local orientation. Particularly interesting was the finding that the Chilean language learners were no more apprehensive and concerned with accuracy when chatting with the NS or the NNS tutor, and were equally engaged in the Internet chat exchange.

These research examples lend support to the view that learner investment in classroom practices may be more important for language learning and the

ownership of English than the native language of the English teacher. The research suggests that investment is enhanced when the pedagogical practices of the teacher increase the range of identities available to language learners, whether face-to-face, digital, or online. Such findings have important implications for English language teacher education, whether teachers are native or non-native speakers. Drawing on their program of research in East Africa, and their concern that English language policies are frequently inappropriately applied across global sites, Early and Norton (2014) have developed a number of recommendations for English language teacher education that are particularly relevant to debates on identity and the ownership of English. These recommendations include an urgent need for greater attention to the implications of locality in teacher education and language policy, and the importance of recognizing the native tongue of the English language learner as a resource to be harnessed for more effective language learning and teaching. Teacher education programs should provide language teachers with opportunities to understand and explore language as both a linguistic system and a social practice, with great variation across sociolinguistic contexts. By developing such an awareness, teachers can explore bilingual/plurilingual and multimodal pedagogies, such as digital storytelling, and build expertise in teaching for transfer across languages, modes, and registers. As language learners appropriate a wider range of identities from which to learn English, there is a greater possibility that relations of power, in both local and global sites, will be more equitable, and educational opportunities more promising.

**Cross-References:** To be completed

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#### ABSTRACT

The ownership of English is best understood in the context of debates on identity, legitimacy, and power. Diverging from a focus on binary distinctions between native and non-native English-speaking teachers, this article argues that as legitimacy becomes more complex and dynamic in a mobile, transnational world, it is more productive to focus on classroom practices and student learning than the native tongue of the English teacher. To the extent that English language learners are invested in the teacher's pedagogy and classroom practices, the legitimacy of the English teacher will be enhanced, whether the teacher is native or non-native. As language learners appropriate a wider range of identities from which to learn English, there is greater possibility that relations of power, in both local and global sites, will be more equitable, and educational opportunities more promising.

#### KEYWORDS

ESL/EFL, Language Teaching, Second Language Acquisition, World Englishes, identity, investment, power

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