

# Identity Negotiation of Pre-Service Teachers of English as a Foreign Language

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**Abstract:** The study of teacher identity has gained prominence in English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching. However, the construction of EFL teacher identity is underresearched, particularly how teachers navigate dominant discourses around native non-native speakers. This paper presents a qualitative study examining four pre-service teachers in an EFL education program. Grounded in the community of practice identity negotiation framework, results suggest that EFL pre-service teachers' processes of identity negotiation mainly resided somewhere between adoption and rejection of legitimate practices in the EFL teacher community, in what we call a zone of tension. The findings of this research indicate that pre-service teachers' identity negotiation processes centered on three main notions: (1) the native speaker as a standard, (2) reflections on accents, and (3) reflections on language practices. These findings contribute to the extant conversation challenging the NS-NNS dichotomy and understanding identity as a dynamic social construct in teacher learning.

**Keywords:** teacher identity negotiation, teacher learning, pre-service teachers.

## Introduction

In the last two decades, the study of teacher identity has gained prominence in English language teaching (e.g. Ilieva, 2010; Moussu & Llurda, 2008). Building on research on teacher identity in mainstream teacher education (e.g. Beijard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004), language teacher identity has been theorized as a) conflicting, in flux, and multiple, b) context-bound, c) constructed, maintained, and d) negotiated through discourse (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 35). Given the complexity of the dynamic nature of language teacher identity, there is a need to understand the processes involved in the formation of teachers' professional identity (Yazan, 2018).

Specifically, in the field of English as a foreign language (EFL), one area that has gained research interest in the study of teacher identity is the hierarchy created by Native Speaker and Non-Native Speaker (NS-NNS) dichotomy, which places the non-native speaker at a subordinate position (Aneja, 2016; Rudolph, Selvi, & Yazan, 2015; Yazan & Rudolph, 2018). This NS-NNS dichotomy leaves little space to explore the dynamic negotiation necessary for non-native English-speaking teachers to construct identities reflecting their legitimacy as speakers and practitioners (Huang, 2018). Despite the growing theoretical problematization of the NS-NNS dichotomy, it is still pervasive in the English language teaching profession (Huang, 2019), particularly in EFL contexts, where little research has been conducted. Considering the need to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the construction of language teacher identity, the present study explores the negotiation of identity of four EFL pre-service teachers in an education program in Costa Rica. Through the analysis of qualitative interview data, this study examines how pre-service teachers adopt and negotiate NS-NNS dichotomy dominant discourses present in their program. Given that pre-service education is a critical period for teacher identity formation, the purpose of the present study is to illuminate the ways in which dominant discourses are initially contested and the ways in which they contribute to tensions in identity development.

## Theory

### Communities of practice

This study uses Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as a theoretical lens to explain the identity process of pre-service teachers in training to become EFL teachers. A Communities of Practice (CoP) framework conceptualizes learning as a process of identification that is a "constant becoming" as the individuals engage in a practice (Wenger, p. 153). In a CoP, membership is obtained by legitimate participation, which takes two forms: central participation of *old-timers*, and peripheral participation of *newcomers*. In an EFL teacher education program, pre-service teachers are newcomers engaging in peripheral participation seeking to find modes of engagement to learn in practice and become legitimate members of the EFL teacher community. Professors and other more experienced professionals are old-timers that model and define legitimate practices for the community.

Within the CoP framework, Wenger's (1998) duality of identification and negotiation in identity formation account for the agency that newcomers enact when seeking membership in the community. On one hand, identification acts as a process to determine the meanings and "styles and discourses produced by the community" (p. 196) relevant for newcomers. On the other hand, negotiation is a form of contestability of existing identifications in the community, involving "the ability, facility, and legitimacy to contribute to, take responsibility for, and shape the meanings that matter within a social configuration" (p. 197). In a teacher education program, pre-service teachers identify with established styles and dominant discourses in coursework and with old-timers. Newcomers decide to what extent those practices are relevant to them. The duality of identification and negotiation captures the dynamic nature of identity formation as an agentive process involving tensions and conflict as pre-service teachers reconcile personal expectations and those of the community.

Previous work utilizing CoP as a framework has analyzed pre-service teachers' negotiation of teaching practices deployed in academic programs. For example, Ilieva (2010) used CoP and a dialogical perspective of identity to study how 20 non-native English Speakers pre-service teachers constructed positive identities in a graduate program in TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages) in Canada. In this study, identity negotiation took place when participants perceived that the discourses did not align with conditions of their future teaching contexts. In a different study in a TESOL program in the United States, Yazan (2018) investigated native speaker graduate students with international experience in EFL. The findings report how three teacher candidates negotiated their aspirations of the teachers that they wanted to become and adopted the practices of reflection and professional language of the community to engage in legitimate participation. One of the participants in this study had teaching experience in Costa Rica, where she applied strict classroom policies for the use of first language. After some degree of negotiation, she started to align her practices with existing approaches, giving a legitimate role to students' first language, as it was valued in the TESOL program.

## The native speaker and non-native speaker (NS-NNS) dichotomy

For EFL teachers, the NS-NNS dichotomy is still deeply rooted in the English teaching profession (Moussu & Llurda, 2008). This NS-NNS binary creates static and mutually exclusive categories that essentialize a monolithic construct of the native speaker placing it in a superior level of a hierarchy (Rudolph et al., 2015). Ideologies of native speakerism (Holliday, 2005) constitute the native speaker as an idealized figure for culture and language and characterize the non-native speaker as inferior, flawed, and a non-White other (Holliday, 2006). Thus, the native speaker becomes the benchmark against which the nonnative speakers' competence is measured (Phillipson, 1992; Yazan & Rudolph, 2018).

Research focusing on identity negotiation among non-native preservice teachers has identified some of the tensions derived from the NS-NNS dichotomy. Gu and Benson (2015) investigated pre-service teachers in China and Hong Kong. Their findings indicate variability in the teacher candidates' views about standard English as privileged form. While candidates in mainland China associated their "accented English" as problematic, candidates in Hong Kong developed a legitimate identity as non-native English teachers by perceiving their accent as an accepted variety of English. Similarly, Huang (2019) found that Chinese English teachers grappled with the NS-NNS dominant discourse; however, they counteracted such narratives by focusing on their strengths, othering the native speaker, being active members in their community of practice, and using hard work as a credibility measure.

The present study aligns with views that pursue conceptualizations beyond the NS-NNS dichotomy and account for the dynamic nature of identity negotiation (Yazan & Rudolph, 2018). Although previous studies have reported tensions in identity negotiation, there is still a need to characterize such tensions and analyze how they go unnoticed by pre-service teachers and are unaddressed in teacher education programs. The research question addressed in this study is: *How are EFL pre-service teachers making sense of dominant NS-NNS discourses and perceived legitimate practices when negotiating their emerging teacher identities?*

## Methods

### Context and participants

This research draws from qualitative interview data from four pre-service teachers in an English teaching program for secondary education at one of the largest public universities in Costa Rica. In a suburban regional site, this four-year bachelor's program prepares students to teach English as a foreign language in secondary schools or similar institutions. In this program, students complete coursework based on English language and pedagogy content along with a one-semester teaching practicum. Also, one of the last oral communication courses includes the Global Classroom project, a telecollaboration activity with American students from a midwestern university in the United

States. In this one semester-long project, students interact on a weekly basis through class oral presentations and discussions mainly about cultural aspects.

The four participants in this study are in the fourth year of the program; they have met the teaching practicum requirement and have participated in the telecollaboration project. They are Spanish-English bilinguals, four of the participants learned English as a foreign language in Costa Rica through elementary, secondary and college education, and one participant, Vanessa, lived in the United States as a child, so she received ESOL services at her school and learned English as a second language.

## Data collection and analysis

This paper presents data from a broader study examining the perspectives and learning experiences of pre-service teachers in this English Teaching program. From the larger corpus of data comprised of teaching artifacts and reflections, we focused on the first round of interviews. After obtaining informed consent from participants, semi-structured interviews were conducted via video calls. Interviews ranged from 45 to 75 minutes; they were recorded and transcribed. Questions included referred to experiences interacting with native speakers, ideas about accent and native speakers, feelings during the teaching practicum, and what matters to them as future teachers. Pseudonyms are used for all the participants. Additionally, researchers collected documents such as course syllabi, evaluation rubrics of oral performance, and official documentation of the description of the curriculum, objectives, and theoretical principles of the program.

The data analysis consisted of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the documentation provided by the program and qualitative deductive coding (Saldaña, 2015) of the interviews guided by Wenger's (1998) theory of identity development within communities of practice. For the analysis of documents, researchers looked for evidence of legitimate practices associated with idealized notions of target language forms. After this process, a list of practices was generated to guide the following stages of analysis. For interview data, we focused on evidence of identity negotiation among participants, and using discourse analysis (Gee, 2011), identified how "situated meanings and Discourses were used to enact and depict identities" (p. 150). In the first stage, we broadly coded turns of talk that denoted adoption or rejection of legitimate practices. In a second stage, we created additional codes derived from the broader codes of adoption and rejection. Noticing that some of the data could not be coded as adoption or rejection, the code of tension was created to account for participants' utterances that indicated that they were grappling with a practice without yet adopting or rejecting it. In the third round, we collapsed the sub-codes previously generated into more general categories that allowed us to better understand the identity negotiation processes of the participants (see Table 1).

To visualize the discourse analysis of pre-service teacher interviews, we used Epistemic Network Analysis (ENA) (Shaffer & Ruis, 2017; Arastoopour et al 2016). We used the network feature of ENA to create weighted discourse networks for each participant. In the networks, the nodes represent the codes identified in the data and the thickness of the links represent how often the participant made connections across the qualitative codes. Connections were operationalized as co-occurrences of codes within a participant's single turn of talk. In addition to the networks, we also visualized each participant's data as a single point in a fixed x-y mathematical space, which represents the center of the mass of the network. The center of mass visualization allows for a summary data point of the network. Moreover, because ENA creates a fixed mathematical space to place the nodes of the networks and the centers of mass, the nodes of the networks are fixed for all participants, which allows for a visual and mathematical comparison among participants.

Table 1: List of generated codes for data analysis

Code	Definition
Adoption	The pre-service teacher takes on an established practice from the teacher education program.
Rejection	The pre-service teacher rejects an established practice from the teacher education program.
Tension/ unknown zone	The pre-service teacher demonstrates a tension when an established practice from the teacher education program poses a conflict for the negotiation of their identity.
The native speaker as the standard	The pre-service teacher expresses their feelings or perspective about an established practice related to the idealized native speaker, who represents the target language norms against which the non-native speaker measures proficiency.
Reflections on accents	The pre-service teacher expresses his feelings or perspective about an established practice related to ideas about accent that impose judgements of legitimacy of accents in relation a standard language variety.

Reflections on language practices	The pre-service teacher expresses his feelings or perspective about an established practice related to own linguistic practices that are perceived as less legitimate than those of they imagine the native speaker would engage in.
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## Results

### Community of practice: the teacher education program

A thematic analysis of course syllabi, assessment rubrics, a description of the program, and the program's theoretical grounding revealed practices and ideologies that were valued in this community of practice. Socio-cultural and constructivist principles guided the orientation of the program to prepare pre-service teachers to respond effectively to the current challenges of the teaching profession. The program values practices that promote interaction to facilitate language learning. For example, the Global Classroom telecollaboration project is a central aspect of the program, providing pre-service teachers the opportunity to interact with native speakers. Although it is a single project in one oral communication course, it accounts for 15% of the evaluation, and the topics discussed in the sessions are included in the midterm and final exams. Additionally, for courses that not including a telecollaboration component, videos and audios mostly with native speakers of English (with American accents) are used to evaluate listening comprehension and as input to complement the development of contents of the class.

With a clear orientation towards the development of linguistic competence, the coursework of the program offers several classes for learning aspects of the English language. In many cases, the evaluation of assignments and projects include a linguistic aspect that assesses the correctness of the language, which in some instances accounts for 50% of the grade. Student work is often expected to be "free from grammatical mistakes" and "include correct sentences." Oral performance is expected to be fluent, without "choppy sentences, long pauses, and hesitations," and students are expected to monitor the "consonant and vowel sounds" and make correct use of "suprasegmentals" (e.g. intonation). Since this teacher education program prepares pre-service teachers to have a high level of proficiency to be able to teach English in different contexts and levels, there is a strong emphasis on correctness. An important goal of the program is to prepare students to be "highly competent in the use of the language and pedagogical strategies to be able to teach and evaluate the language and promote the correct use of English". Moreover, throughout the program, there are strict English-only policies that do not allow students to use Spanish, and "translation and Spanish-like structures" are not well received. Taken altogether, the course syllabi, assessment rubrics, and a description of the program characterize language correctness and non-accented English speaking as components of legitimate participation and membership in this education program.

### Pre-service teachers' negotiation of identity

In the present study, the data suggest that pre-service teachers grapple with the idealization of the native speaker embedded in their perception of what their community of practice values as a competence for English teaching. The majority of the data points analyzed from the interviews fell between adoption and rejection of practices related to this idealization, which we characterized as a zone of tension. Such tensions manifested in frustration, self-doubt, and developing ideologies, which altogether encompassed the complexity and dynamism in the negotiation of identity of these future teachers of English as a foreign language. More specifically, this study found that pre-service teachers' process of negotiation of identity centered on three main notions: (1) the native speaker as a standard, (2) reflections on accents, and (3) reflections on language practices.

#### The native speaker as the standard

Participants addressed a dichotomy between native and non-native speakers. All participants self-identified themselves as non-native speakers and referred to speakers from the United States and the United Kingdom as native speakers. They highlighted the importance of interaction with native speakers as one of the "best" forms of interaction for meaningful language learning. This pattern was reified in the data when participants recalled a class project described as significant learning experience in one of their oral communication courses. Namely, this project was the Global Classroom, and it involved frequent interaction via video conference with a college level class from a university in the US. As Laura recalls, "it was very nice 'cause we had the opportunity, as we didn't always have it in the major, to talk with other natives". All the participants commented that they would implement the Global classroom project in high schools if they had that possibility because such interaction with native speakers is a unique channel for students to learn about language and culture.

However, tensions emerged when the "native speaker" was positioned as a benchmark for language competence. In the following excerpt, Pablo describes his insight about participating in the Global Classroom.

“we have like a *real contact* or a real way to *see how much we have improved* in terms of the language when we take the oral six course because this is the time we have to, let's say face real life situations [...] So in this case, I enjoyed the experience a lot because this is what I wanted [since] the beginning, like to practice with natives.”

While at first glance this may not appear to be a conflicting perspective, the use of “real contact” primarily denotes a preference for interaction with natives as more desirable, placing interactions with non-native speaker as subordinate. Moreover, the statement “see how much we have improved” positions the native speaker as the standard of correctness with which Pablo measures his own proficiency. This seems to be a place for tension for Pablo because in other occasions he acknowledges frustration and self-consciousness when interacting with native speaker or comparing to them and their accuracy. For example, he stated, “I have *compared myself* listening to videos and audios from the internet, videos from YouTube and *I have tried to talk like them*, but it is almost impossible to achieve their speech or their level.”

Another instance of tension was identified in Vanessa’s interview. With her experience as an ESL learner in the US, she expressed conflict in regard to the target language norms in the program. She stated,

“here [in Costa Rica] *you go from Spanish to learning a structured type of English*. And to me, I don't see English that way. I even make a lot of grammatical mistakes that my classmates here in Costa Rica don't make [...] they know a more structured language than I do, and therefore they will teach a more structured language. I don't believe so much. Like I don't even know how I'm going to do when I actually have to teach, but I don't see myself to setting that down and then giving the lesson, just some parts of the sentence or the different tenses of the verb. Like I *just wish to teach the language as it is*.”

Vanessa’s insight was different to Pablo’s in the sense that she grappled with the idea that a native speaker acquires the language naturally and unconsciously, without thinking much about the structure. By saying “you go from Spanish to learning a structured type of English,” she compared how learning Spanish as a native language is a natural process, and learning English in an EFL context seems more “structured”. She placed the non- native speaker in a more uncomfortable position of learning and having to think more about the language before using it. Her experience having learned English as a second language contrasted with the way English is taught in Costa Rica, a more deliberate approach that pursues the target language norms rather than communication skills. Vanessa offered a nuanced tension that challenged the norm; therefore, as she says, she imagined herself providing opportunities for her students where they just use “the language as it is” rather than focusing on correctness. However, she recognized that the expectation in an EFL context demands more attention to linguistic form, and that is where Vanessa’s tension resides. At the same time Vanessa adhered to the notion that the native speaker has an advantage over the non- native speaker, which still represented an ideal of language learning for her.

### The non-native’s personal reflections on accents

The participants in this study adopted ideologies that associated non-nativeness with a distinctive less legitimate accent, but still expressed tensions with this perspective.

For example, two of the participants, Pablo and Alfonso, expressed a desire to achieve a native accent, and were frustrated with not being able to do so. In the following excerpt, Pablo explains his feelings during an activity his teaching practicum, where he set up a conference call with a native speaker to talk about holidays in his class.

“When she was speaking with my students, I was like, oh my God, she *sounds native* [...] And I was, Oh my God, *I'm not native*. But the good thing I think is that [...] I tried to *be careful* when speaking because you know, when teaching you are kind of *exposed to be judged* by your students. So what I did was like to be careful with my speech, even though my rhythm or my musicality or my accent is not as native-like.”

Pablo’s moment of tension comes when he realizes that his guest speaker “sounds native”, which indicates unaccented speech. In contrast, by saying “Oh my God, I am not native”, he is acknowledging that he sounds different, his accent is not “native-like”; therefore, it is accented. This realization seems even more problematic when Pablo describes his efforts to achieve a native accent by listening to videos and trying to imitate them. Nonetheless, as he recognizes, “it is almost impossible to achieve their level”. This marked accent puts Pablo in

a vulnerable position of judgement and linguistic insecurity as he feels that his students perceive his accent, thus he becomes more self-conscious about his pronunciation.

In contrast, Alfonso's case illustrates a nuanced negotiation in which some rejection, adoption, and a new conceptualization collide. He states that he categorically disagrees with the idea that that he needs to have an American Standard accent. This seems to be influenced by his experience living and studying in the US a few semesters ago, which exposed him to different accents, so he rejects practices favoring certain varieties of English or judging accents that he has perceived in his program either from professors or from classmates. The proceeding quote shows how Alfonso is beginning to make a difference between the expected accent for teachers and for EFL students.

"I know that in a context in which I have learned *English for teaching* [...] I might have the idea that it would be important having a very good accent or at least standardized accent. But getting out of the teaching context, I think that *having a strong accent [Spanish accent]* means that there has been a really good effort on learning a different language and that is of course acceptable to me [...] there shouldn't be a judgment in this case."

Alfonso disagrees with judgement on those with Spanish accents learning English. However, he thinks it is desirable for a teacher to have an unmarked "standardized accent". This distinction indicates that Alfonso is beginning to grapple with notions of differentiated communicative expectations for teachers and learners. Although that still confers legitimacy to the demand for teachers to have an unmarked accent, his use of uncertain language such as "I might have the idea" denotes that he could be initiating a personal reflection on his ideologies of accent.

### The non-native's personal reflections on language practices

For the participants in this study, language practices of non-native speaker were identified as subordinated compared to those of native speaker. Because the participants in this study were non-native speaker, this was another source of adoption and tension.

Strict English-only conditions for learning were adopted by Vanessa, who sees the role of Spanish as problematic.

"if you're with your classmate who speaks Spanish and you have an assignment to do, you're gonna do it in Spanish. You're going to do it on your mother tongue and then translate it to the language or, write it down. But as you're doing it, you're doing it in Spanish. So *that's a whole experience that's being wasted* of using the language."

In her statement "that's a whole experience that's being wasted", Vanessa shows that she is adopting a monolingual practice that does not give a legitimate position to Spanish. This fails to recognize how the first language can be a resource that actually enriches the language learning process of a bilingual who can strategically use Spanish and English. Rather than embracing the dynamic language practices that a bilingual is naturally inclined to, Vanessa's words favor rigid monolingual practices.

In contrast, Laura identified Spanish as an obstacle towards competent proficiency. When asked about how she felt about having an accent, she replied:

"Frustrated, but I understand that *my brain has been always in Spanish mode*, so I can't really change all my mindset to the other language. I have to remember [remind] myself that [...] I make these kinds of mistakes that *the important thing is communication*. Not the pronunciation, but still I'm very perfectionist about it, so it really frustrates me sometimes."

Laura's feelings of frustration stem from her Spanish accent as an obstacle when speaking English. She reconciles this by understanding that her "brain has always been in Spanish mode," and that the important aspect of learning English is the ability to communicate with others. However, there is evidence of identity tension as she admits that she still becomes frustrated about perceiving traces of Spanish in the way she speaks, and thus is "very perfectionist" about her pronunciation. Although different, Vanessa and Laura's identity negotiations fail to acknowledge the complex language practices of speakers of two or more languages, who navigate more fluid linguistic processes.

## Discourse network visualizations

All four participants identified tensions as they discussed how they adopt and reject particular aspects of the social identity of becoming an EFL teacher. In their discourse networks, *all four participants made connections to tensions and it was a central node in all participant networks* (see Figure 1). Fewer connections were made with *adoption*; however, a strong relationship is observed across participants between adoption and the nonnative speaker as a standard. Connections to *rejection* are only observed in one participant. Vanessa's core tensions were around acknowledging the NS as an ideal standard and adopting the nonnative speaker practices as less legitimate. Pablo and Laura had similar networks but included stronger tensions around ideologies of accents. Finally, Alfonso was the only participant who explicitly rejected developing identities and practices in the community of practice.

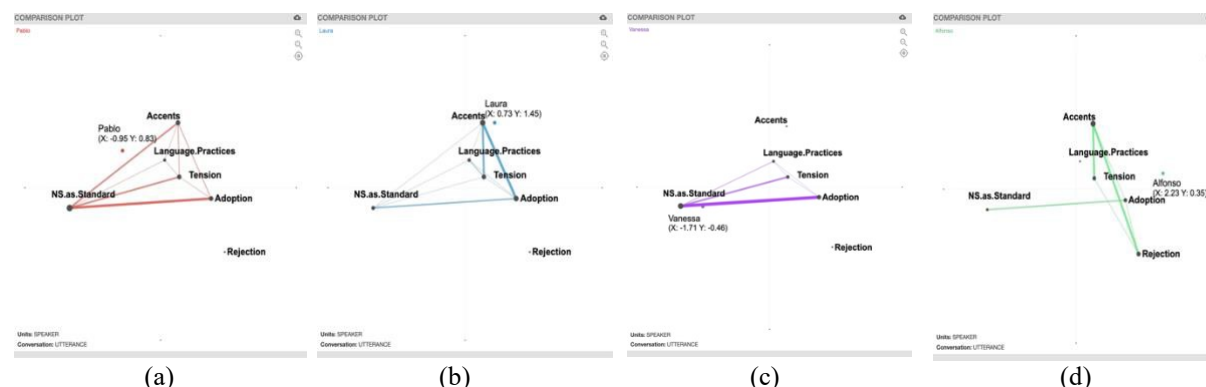


Figure 1. Discourse networks for (a) Pablo, (b) Laura, (c) Vanessa, and (d) Alfonso. *All teachers had connections to tension, which is why it is a central node.*

## Discussion and conclusion

Using Wenger's (1998) identity framework in communities of practices, this study examined interview data from EFL pre-service teachers to characterize their identity development and acceptance or rejection of practices and dominant discourses within their program. The findings in this study suggest that EFL pre-service teachers' processes of identity negotiation mainly resided somewhere between adoption and rejection—in a zone of tension. As acknowledged by the communities of practice framework, membership can be “enabling and limiting,” and thus, tensions are inherent to a social construction of identity (Wenger, 1998, p. 207). This widely explains why the findings of this study underscore the presence of tensions in the identity work pre-service teachers are doing in their teacher education program.

The zones of tension in this study centered on three themes: (1) the native speaker as a standard, (2) reflections on accent, and (3) reflections on language practices. These findings align with notions that position the native speaker as an idealized model for language and culture (Holliday, 2005, 2006; Phillipson, 1992) and that native speakers have a superior communicative capacity associated with correctness (Moussu & Llurda, 2008). For the pre-service teachers in this study, the figure of the native speaker achieves a “special status” in the community of practice, which they adopt to some extent; however, they start to contest this construct as they become more central participants in the practice. In other words, pre-service teachers were negotiating to what extent the idealized native speaker matters to them and how it conflicts with their self-perceptions of their existing identities, and thus existing in a zone of identity tensions.

This tension might also be the result of a process of “othering” (Holliday, 2005, 2006) in which pre-service teachers conceive themselves as a “non-White other” positioned in a lower level of the social and linguistic hierarchy (Rudolph et al., 2015) dictated by the NS-NNS dichotomy. By doing this, they are distancing themselves from that idealized native speaker, which might promote feelings of self-doubt (Braine, 2004) as they perceive themselves as less legitimate speakers of English. This indicates that there is adoption of the idealized native speaker more generally, but when reflecting on personal attributes and personal ways of practicing language, tensions seem to intensify. Tensions occur in a more intimate space, in which accent and the role of first language begin to contest the dominant discourse of the native speaker.

Highlighting these tensions in the identity negotiation of these four EFL pre-service teachers contributes to the extant conversation challenging the NS-NNS dichotomy. The analysis of the perspectives of the participants in this study offer a nuanced understanding of where tensions might reside and how individuals are adopting and contesting meanings. Efforts to interrogate the dominant discourse of the idealized native speaker in an EFL context should take into consideration the ways in which identity tensions operate at this personal level. More

broadly, the results of this study contribute to the understanding of identity as a dynamic social construct in teacher learning. Particularly, the findings illustrate the interplay of adoption and negotiation of practices and dominant discourses that is inherent to how teachers grapple with personal expectations and those of their teacher education programs

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