The Problem of the 'Native-Speaker'

Sofía Parada Alvarez
Sofia.paradaa@uc.cl
0009-0005-3916-3215

Abstract

Native-speaker ideology operates in English language teaching and learning within Chilean university contexts as an organising principle of linguistic authority, social prestige, and pedagogical legitimacy. Findings from prior research on accent bias among university students indicate a persistent orientation toward British and American standardised models, even in contexts where the legitimacy of diverse English accents and varieties is explicitly recognised. This configuration is sustained through institutional expectations, pedagogical practices, and processes of linguistic self-assessment, as described from the perspectives of World Englishes, language ideologies, sociolinguistic identity, and native-speakerism. Its effects are inscribed in educational trajectories characterised by continuous self-monitoring, communicative insecurity, and the systematic devaluation of non-standard linguistic repertoires. Within this framework, the native speaker functions as a regulatory model of competence, delimiting the conditions under which linguistic legitimacy is granted. The revision of this model requires a reorientation of pedagogical criteria toward intelligibility, communicative effectiveness, and the recognition of linguistic diversity.

Keywords: native-speakerism; language ideologies; bilingual identity; accent and prestige; English language teaching.

Resumen

La ideología del native speaker opera en la enseñanza y el aprendizaje del inglés en contextos universitarios chilenos como principio organizador de la autoridad lingüística, el prestigio social y la legitimidad pedagógica. Resultados de investigaciones previas sobre sesgo de acento en estudiantes universitarios muestran una orientación persistente hacia modelos estandarizados británicos y estadounidenses, incluso en escenarios donde se reconoce explícitamente la legitimidad de la diversidad de acentos y variedades del inglés. Esta configuración se sostiene en expectativas institucionales, prácticas pedagógicas y procesos de autoevaluación lingüística, tal como se describe desde los enfoques de World Englishes, ideologías lingüísticas, identidad sociolingüística y native-speakerism. Sus efectos se inscriben en trayectorias formativas caracterizadas por la autovigilancia permanente, la inseguridad comunicativa y la desvalorización sistemática de repertorios lingüísticos no estandarizados. En este marco, el hablante nativo funciona como modelo regulador de la competencia, delimitando las condiciones de legitimidad lingüística. La revisión de este modelo exige reorientar los criterios pedagógicos hacia la inteligibilidad, la eficacia comunicativa y el reconocimiento de la diversidad lingüística.

Palabras clave: native-speakerism; ideologías lingüísticas; identidad bilingüe; acento y prestigio; enseñanza del inglés.

1. Introduction

The notion of the 'native speaker' has been, and for a long time, a problematic concept within applied linguistics. The idea is often idealised as the embodiment of linguistic authority, intuitive grammatical knowledge, and cultural authenticity, and thereby positioned

as the normative benchmark against which all other language users—particularly second-language speakers—are implicitly and explicitly measured. This hierarchical positioning has cultivated a prevalent ideology in which being a 'native-speaker' is associated with prestige, intelligibility, and acceptability, resulting in the prioritisation of superficial performance markers, such as accent and pronunciation, over more substantive measures of communicative competence and contextual proficiency.

Furthermore, in the context of an increasingly interconnected and interdependent global society, facilitated by the exponential growth of digital technologies, the importance of social media, the global circulation of cultural products, and the intensification of international mobility, the acquisition of a second or even third language has become not only more common but, in many cases, socially and economically necessary to maintain the international competiveness. In Chile, the significant economic growth experienced during the 1990s required the adoption of English as a strategic instrument to enhance the nation's international competitiveness (Castro, 2011; Albuja & Merino, 2017 as cited in Philominraj, K., Kormos, J., & Larenas, C., 2021). Within this global linguistic ecology, English has emerged as the predominant lingua franca, functioning as a shared medium of communication among speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds who do not share a common first language. As Seidlhofer (2005) aptly asserts, a lingua franca is not defined by native ownership but by its utilitarian function across linguistic boundaries, a perspective that fundamentally destabilises the notion that native speakers possess exclusive rights to linguistic authority or pedagogical centrality.

With all this in mind, this essay arises from a critical re-engagement with a conceptual gap identified in the discussion section of my prior research, "The quest for standard English: Exploring accent bias toward non-native accents among Chilean learners" which delves into how

Chilean university students perceive native and non-native English accents, revealing a preference for standard varieties like British and American English. Despite recognising the legitimacy of diverse accents, learners show bias shaped by social and educational pressures. The study highlights how native-speakerist ideologies affect identity, confidence, and motivation, and calls for more inclusive language teaching that values communication over native-like performance. Despite mentioning the sociolinguistic implications of accent bias, I failed to adequately address the deeper ideological forces that shape and sustain the 'native speaker' construct within language education, nor did I thoroughly consider the implications of such ideologies for the learners' identity, motivation, and self-perception. At the time, my conceptualisation of bilingualism was relatively limited to cognitive and pragmatic dimensions, and I did not yet possess the theoretical tools necessary to interrogate the dimensions of language ownership or the affective consequences of striving toward an often unattainable 'native-like' ideal.

Building on the insights gained through my engagement with the literature on bilingualism and language ideology throughout the current course, this essay seeks to interrogate the enduring influence of native-speakerist ideologies in shaping educational expectations, institutional practices, and individual aspirations. Drawing from a range of theoretical frameworks, including Davies's (2004) critique of the native speaker as a sociolinguistic category, Holliday's (2015) theorisation of native-speakerism as a form of cultural disbelief and professional marginalization, and Tupas and Rubdy's (2015) argument for reconceptualising Englishes within unequal and power-laden contexts, I aim to explore how these ideologies manifest in Chilean bilingual university contexts, and how they condition the way learners perceive their linguistic identities, navigate their language learning trajectories, and position themselves concerning normative models of language competence. Thus,

some of the data from my original research will be used to substantiate the theoretical claims of this essay further and illustrate how native-speakerist ideologies manifest in learners' perceptions and experiences within the Chilean educational context.

2. Research problem

To guide this pseudo-investigation, the following research question will serve as its central axis: How does the native-speakerist mindset shape learners' identity, confidence, and aspirations in bilingual university contexts, such as those in Chile? This question is situated within a broader effort to interrogate the ideological underpinnings of English language teaching and learning, particularly in sociocultural contexts where the global dominance of English intersects with local histories of linguistic inequality, class stratification, and postcolonial influence.

The privileging of the so-called 'native speaker' as the linguistic ideal is not merely a pedagogical preference but a manifestation of deeper social and cultural hierarchies that systematically valorise certain varieties of English—typically those associated with white, Western, monolingual speakers—while simultaneously rendering other varieties, including those spoken fluently by bilingual or multilingual individuals, as inferior, deficient, or inauthentic. In the Chilean university context, where English is widely promoted as a tool for upward mobility and international relevance, such ideologies often translate into implicit and explicit expectations that learners should approximate a 'native-speaker' standard in both form and function. These expectations, though rarely questioned in institutional discourse, can have significant implications for how learners perceive their own linguistic identities, their sense of belonging within academic and professional communities, and their long-term aspirations as users and potential teachers of English. Also, in Chile there is a connection between a 'native' accent and socioeconomic status, thus, learners who speak with more standardised or native-like accents are often perceived as

more educated, competent, or privileged, reinforcing class-based linguistic hierarchies and placing additional pressure on students from less advantaged backgrounds to conform to these unattainable norms.

Within this context, the present study centres the experiences of learners who navigate such educational and ideological expectations. It seeks to dive deeper into how native-speakerist beliefs are internalised, resisted, or negotiated by bilingual individuals within Chilean higher education. These dynamics are not only theoretical in nature; they are deeply affective, often producing emotional responses such as anxiety, diminished self-confidence, and feelings of inadequacy. Furthermore, these ideologies significantly shape learners' perceptions of their own linguistic legitimacy and influence how they imagine themselves as future users of English who are competent, confident, and socially recognised.

The relevance of this inquiry extends beyond the personal experiences of individual learners. It also aims to uncover the broader institutional discourses and pedagogical practices that sustain native-speakerism as a dominant framework in English language education. By making visible the structural dimensions of these beliefs, the study encourages a critical re-evaluation of what it means to be a successful bilingual speaker of English. It argues for educational approaches that value and legitimise diverse linguistic identities and repertoires, particularly in educational settings that are shaped by both global language ideologies and local sociocultural inequalities.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework underpinning this study provides a multidimensional lens through which to examine the sociolinguistic, ideological, and pedagogical dynamics that shape learners' perceptions of English, particularly in contexts where the language is acquired as a foreign language. Since this essay builds upon my previous research, it shares essential components of the original

theoretical framework. Central to this framework are theories of World Englishes, sociolinguistic identity, language ideology, and communicative accommodation, which together provide a critical lens for interrogating the power dynamics underlying the valorisation of certain English varieties over others.

Kachru's (1985) model of World Englishes conceptualizes the global use of English in terms of three concentric circles: the Inner Circle, comprising countries where English is spoken as a native language (e.g., the United Kingdom and the United States); the Outer Circle, where English serves as a second or official language (e.g., India, Nigeria); and the Expanding Circle, where English is primarily learned as a foreign language (e.g., Chile). This model is instrumental in highlighting the global diffusion of English and the legitimacy of non-native varieties. However, it has been critiqued for its binary emphasis on native versus non-native speakers and for insufficiently addressing intra-circle variation (Holmes, 2013).

Building on Kachru's foundation, McArthur's (1987) Wheel Model of World Englishes offers a more nuanced representation by positioning World Standard English at the hub and surrounding it with regional and sociocultural varieties. This model emphasises the plurality and legitimacy of Englishes across contexts and explicitly acknowledges the value of diverse dialects, sociolects, and accents such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Indian English, and Scouse. Together, these frameworks provide a helpful structure for examining how learners in Chile understand and respond to linguistic diversity within English, even as institutional practices continue to favour "standard" varieties such as Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American (GA).

The persistence of these standard forms as linguistic ideals is closely linked to processes of standardisation and prescriptivism, wherein certain varieties are deemed superior and others are marginalised. The ideology of standard language, rooted in notions of purity, correctness, and authority, often

shapes pedagogical materials, assessment practices, and learner expectations (Lippi-Green, 2012; Acheme & Cionea, 2022). In Chile, the prominence of RP and GA within educational discourse reflects broader social hierarchies, where linguistic capital is unequally distributed across class lines, and where private institutions tend to promote native-like accents as aspirational norms. In contrast, public institutions struggle to provide equal access to quality English instruction (Holliday, 2015).

In addition to macro-level frameworks, this study also draws on Norton's (1995, 2013) theory of language and identity, which emphasises the dynamic interplay between language learning and the construction of selfhood. Norton argues that language learners are not merely passive recipients of linguistic knowledge, but active agents who negotiate their identities in relation to shifting social norms, power structures, and communicative goals. This perspective is particularly salient for understanding how native-speakerism affects learners' self-concept and motivation, especially when learners are positioned as deficient to an unattainable native ideal.

In the same note, Holliday (2015) critiques the ideology of native-speakerism, which privileges native English speakers—particularly from Western, inner-circle countries—while marginalising non-native speakers and teachers. He argues that this belief system perpetuates a form of cultural disbelief, rooted in neo-racist assumptions that associate linguistic and professional competence with whiteness and Westernness. This results in systemic inequality within English language education, where non-native professionals are often viewed as inherently less legitimate. Holliday calls for a shift toward cultural belief, advocating for the recognition of diverse Englishes and a dismantling of the native/non-native binary, in favour of more inclusive and equitable teaching practices.

Davies (2004) complicates this discussion by underscoring the ambiguity and mythic nature of the "native speaker" as

both identity and ideology. His critique highlights how the concept of the native speaker, although often treated as an objective standard in applied linguistics, is fundamentally shaped by social perceptions and institutional power. Davies' notion that "membership" as a native speaker bestows authority and linguistic legitimacy (p. 434) connects directly with the exclusion many L2 speakers experience in professional and educational contexts, despite demonstrable proficiency.

The theoretical framework is further enriched by Accent Prestige Theory, which posits that accents are evaluated based on perceived social status, competence, and credibility (Lippi-Green, 2012), and by Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles et al., 1991), which examines how speakers modify their linguistic behavior in response to social dynamics. Acheme and Cionea (2022) found that standard-accented speakers were consistently evaluated more favorably in terms of status and competence, reinforcing the idea that accent-based judgments are not neutral but deeply embedded in societal ideologies and expectations. These frameworks elucidate how Chilean learners may engage in convergence strategies—modifying their speech to align with perceived norms—or divergence strategies—asserting their identity through non-conformity—in response to the perceived prestige or stigma attached to different English varieties.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive foundation for analysing how native-speakerist ideologies operate within the Chilean context. They facilitate a critical examination of the tensions between linguistic diversity and standardisation, between personal identity and institutional expectations, and between global language ideologies and local pedagogical realities. This framework not only supports the analysis of learner attitudes and experiences but also informs the broader discussion on how to foster more inclusive and equitable approaches to English language education.

4. Personal Insights

Reflecting critically on my own experience as a second-language learner of English within a Chilean academic context, I have come to recognise the subtle yet pervasive influence of native-speakerist ideologies on my own language learning journey. From the earliest stages of formal instruction, I was taught that the ultimate goal of English acquisition was to approximate, as closely as possible, the linguistic norms associated with native speakers from the United States or the United Kingdom. This emphasis was subtly yet pervasively embedded in multiple aspects of the educational experience, including curriculum design, pronunciation rubrics, assessment criteria, and classroom interaction. Although it was rarely stated explicitly, the belief in a singular model of authentic English permeated instructional materials, was reinforced through teacher feedback, and reflected a broader sociocultural imaginary that equates linguistic legitimacy with conformity to standardised norms. Such an ideological orientation, while intended to motivate excellence or establish clear learning targets, has significant psychological and pedagogical consequences. Foremost among these is the internalisation of the belief that anything less than native-like performance—especially in terms of accent, fluency, or idiomatic usage—constitutes failure or inadequacy. This is particularly damaging given that achieving full native-like proficiency, especially in adulthood, is widely understood within second-language acquisition research to be extraordinarily rare, if not impossible, due to cognitive, neurological, and sociolinguistic factors (Birdsong, 2006). However, despite this empirical reality, the expectation persists, creating a dissonance between learners' aspirations and their perceived abilities.

In my case, this dissonance manifested in a gradual erosion of confidence. Although I had attained a high level of communicative competence and was capable of engaging in complex academic and professional discourse, I frequently found myself second-guessing

my lexical choices, apologising for my accent, or avoiding spontaneous speaking opportunities altogether. What began as a motivational benchmark slowly transformed into a source of anxiety, self-doubt, and demotivation—a phenomenon that, I have since come to realise, is not uncommon among advanced L2 learners operating under the shadow of native-speakerism.

The findings from my previous research on Chilean learners further reinforce this experience. Despite an overall neutral stance toward accent variety, learners consistently rated standardised English accents—especially British varieties such as RP—as more prestigious, particularly in professional or educational contexts. This preference was exemplified by the high ratings given to Speaker 10 (Oxford, UK), whose accent was perceived as both more suitable for formal situations and more socially desirable. Participants associated such accents with education, privilege, and success, reinforcing a societal hierarchy where linguistic capital is closely tied to standardised speech norms.

By contrast, non-native and non-standard accents—such as those from Oman, Brooklyn, or even non-RP native varieties like Australian English—were often perceived as less appropriate, less intelligible, or less professional. These perceptions, as discussed by Lippi-Green (2012) and reflected in my data, are not based on linguistic merit but on entrenched social ideologies and aesthetic biases. Notably, even when participants acknowledged the legitimacy of non-standard varieties, they expressed a personal desire to approximate native-like pronunciation, highlighting the internal conflict between embracing diversity and conforming to perceived norms. For example, one participant noted, "Personally, I would rather learn a more standard variety, maybe due to the prestige that comes attached to speaking a more standard variety," illustrating the extent to which societal value judgments about language influence learners' personal goals. This comment reflects how learners internalise the association between standardised accents and social credibility, even

when they simultaneously acknowledge the legitimacy of other varieties.

Moreover, there are more examples. One student noted that their teachers encouraged them to pronounce English "more like the British." At the same time, another expressed a firm attachment to their Latin American accent, viewing it as a marker of their cultural identity. These voices illustrate how standardisation, when imposed without critical reflection, can undermine learners' confidence and compel them to distance themselves from their linguistic heritage. Language, in this context, becomes not only a communicative tool but also a site of identity negotiation and ideological pressure.

The harm of the native-speakerist mindset, therefore, is not merely theoretical but deeply personal. It creates an environment in which learners are invited not to develop their own voice in a new language, but to erase the traces of their linguistic origins in pursuit of an ideal that is simultaneously valorised and unattainable. This not only undermines learner motivation but also constrains the development of authentic, confident, and agentive language users. Instead of being encouraged to view their multilingualism as an asset, learners are often positioned as perpetually deficient, always "on the way" to a norm they may never reach.

A more equitable and pedagogically sound approach, I now believe, would involve decentering the native speaker as a model altogether and embracing more pluralistic and identity-affirming conceptions of language learning. Learners should be empowered to develop their own communicative repertoires, grounded in intelligibility, effectiveness, and personal expression, rather than in mimicry of an idealised and exclusionary linguistic standard. Only by dismantling the native-speakerist mindset can language education become a space of true empowerment, where difference is not corrected, but celebrated.

5. Conclusion

This essay aimed to explore how native-speakerist ideologies continue to influence how Chilean university learners of English understand their linguistic identities, aspirations, and self-worth. Drawing on a combination of theoretical perspectives and insights from my previous research, I have demonstrated that the concept of the 'native speaker' remains deeply ingrained in both educational structures and personal experiences. Learners are often encouraged to adopt models of English that are considered more prestigious or legitimate, particularly those associated with British or American varieties.

Even when students acknowledge the value of non-native or non-standard varieties, many still feel the need to speak in a more native-like way. This tension reflects a broader issue in English language education, where the focus often shifts from meaningful communication to performance, and where learners may feel pressured to meet unrealistic expectations. As a result, many experience anxiety, self-doubt, or a sense of inadequacy, even when their communicative skills are strong. These feelings are not only personal but also reflect broader societal messages about what counts as proper or successful English.

In light of this, there is a clear need for a more inclusive and realistic approach to language teaching, one that values clarity, mutual understanding, and the richness of diverse linguistic backgrounds. Learners should not be made to feel that their accents or cultural identities are something to correct or hide. Instead, classrooms should create space for different ways of speaking, and teachers should be supported in recognising the full range of Englishes spoken around the world.

Challenging native-speakerism does not mean lowering standards. It means changing what we understand those standards to be. It means shifting our focus from trying to sound like someone else to being able to express who we are clearly, confidently, and with pride in ourselves and our background.

If we can make that shift, English language education will become not just more inclusive but also more empowering for learners in Chile and beyond.

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