UNIVERSITY OF MURCIA

*International Journal of English Studies*

IJES

http://revistas.um.es/ijes

# Pre-service EFL teachers' ideologies and self-concepts: Juggling between intelligibility and nativeness discourses

XAVIER MARTIN-RUBIÓ, LAIA LACASA-CERVELLÓ & IRATI DIERT-BOTÉ*
*Universitat de Lleida (Spain)*

Received: 17/02/2025. Accepted: 15/05/2026

**ABSTRACT**

Language ideologies, which influence how speakers perceive and value linguistic varieties, are closely intertwined with self-concept, as the way language users see themselves may influence their identity construction and their engagement with such varieties. Accordingly, this paper examines the positioning of four pre-service English teachers along a spectrum of language ideologies, ranging from native-oriented to intelligibility-oriented ideologies, and the ways these ideologies relate to their self-concepts as English as a Foreign Language (EFL) users. The participants interviewed were students enrolled in BA English Studies programs at two Spanish universities (two in Catalonia –Alfonso and Laila– and two in Andalusia –Ana and Nacho). Several small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2006) emerged in participants' semi-structured interviews, which were qualitatively analyzed using Narrative Positioning Analysis (Bamberg, 1997). Findings revealed nuanced variations in their EFL self-concepts and ideologies towards intelligibility-nativeness, although a preference for native-speakerism appeared to dominate. Their language ideologies were observed to mediate their self-concepts, pushing them to reconcile their idealizations of native speaker norms and their growing recognition of intelligibility discourses. Overall, despite the limitations of this study, these localized narratives illustrate the diverse and sometimes contradictory landscapes of EFL learners' self-concepts and ideologies, positioning them along the native-oriented to intelligibility-oriented continuum.

**KEYWORDS:** intelligibility, EFL self-concept, language ideology, small stories

[1]***Address for correspondence***: Departament de Llengües i Literatures Estrangeres, Universitat de Lleida. Plaça Victor Siurana, 1, 25003, Lleida (España); email: xavier.martinrubio@udl.cat



Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131 doi:10.6018/ijes.650251

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Discussions on how English is perceived and taught in diverse linguistic contexts have increasingly challenged conventional notions of language ownership, native-speaker norms, and pedagogical approaches, particularly through perspectives informed by English as a Lingua Franca (Jenkins, 2015). While English language teaching policies and research have increasingly acknowledged intelligibility perspectives, many learners and teachers still gravitate towards native-speakerism, perceiving native-like proficiency as the ultimate linguistic ideal (Levis, 2005). This tension is particularly salient for pre-service English teachers, whose language ideologies and self-concepts are likely to be influential on their confidence, teaching approaches, and future professional identities.

This study examines the interplay between language ideologies (Silverstein, 1979) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) self-concept (Mercer, 2011a) among four pre-service English teachers in Spain. It situates their experiences within the broader debate on intelligibility and native-speakerism by exploring how they navigate competing discourses. Drawing on Narrative Positioning Analysis (Bamberg, 1997) and the small stories framework (Georgakopoulou, 2006), the research analyzes semi-structured interviews conducted with participants from two Spanish universities, located in Catalonia and Andalusia. These narratives offer insightful perspectives into how aspiring English teachers construct their linguistic self-concepts, negotiate their positioning on the native-intelligibility continuum, and respond to the ideological pressures embedded in their educational and social environments. Therefore, by examining these localized yet illustrative cases, this paper sheds light on the multifaceted processes that play a role in the (re-)construction of language discourse and EFL self-concept.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Ideologies in language learning and use

All of us are surrounded by language even before we are born. Our mother tongue(s), the different dialects of these languages, the foreign languages we are taught at school, or the ones we engage with while watching films or listening to music, they all permeate our everyday lives and constitute an important element of who we are. Every day of our lives is full of social experiences that contribute to shaping what we believe and what we feel about the different language varieties that play a role in said lives. By social experiences, we mean even the smallest events that configure our emotions and our beliefs about language varieties and communities, the way languages are learnt, and notions of correctness, purity, or beauty. Hüllen (1992) differentiates between "language of identification" and "language of communication". The language of identification is the one we feel emotionally and culturally attached to, so it shapes our sense of self and belonging, often linked to our heritage language(s). In contrast, the language of communication serves a more functional purpose, enabling interaction in various contexts without necessarily carrying the same emotional weight. These roles, however, are not static; when seen as a continuum subject to change, this view offers a simple yet effective way of

 
Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

conceptualizing our affective relationships and ideologies towards the different language varieties in our lives (Martin-Rubió & Diert-Boté, 2021).

More specifically, language ideology can be defined as "sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use" (Silverstein, 1979, p. 193). Examples of language ideologies described in the literature are the "ideology of the dialect" (Watts, 1999), that is, the belief that local dialects serve as key markers of local identity, or the "standard language ideology" (Milroy, 2001), i.e., the assumption that there is a single correct form of a language that is superior to other variations. These (shared) beliefs are (re)produced through everyday mundane actions: laughing at a classmate's dialectal expression, using a cool foreign word to mark solidarity, or even scolding a colleague at a meeting for using a swear word.

Particularly interesting for this study is Levis's (2005, p. 370) identification of two competing ideologies, which he calls the *nativeness* and the *intelligibility* principles. The first "holds that it is both possible and desirable to achieve native-like pronunciation in a foreign language", whereas the latter holds that "learners simply need to be understandable". In turn, McCambridge and Saarinen (2015) identify what they call the "not" and the "but" in native/non-native ideologies. In their research, the participants displaying a "non-nativeness as not" ideology clearly see themselves as "not" natives, and imagine non-nativeness along a continuum, with some non-natives being more native than others. For them, making mistakes is more acceptable in a country like Finland (mostly inhabited by non-natives) than in native-English territories. Likewise, texts written for local consumption "were not seen as having to conform to strict standards of language correctness, whereas texts written for a more global level […] were seen as more subject to native demands" (McCambridge & Saarinen, 2015, p. 306). In contrast, the participants displaying a "non-nativeness as but" ideology also regard themselves as not natives, "but" they argue that two factors override native-speaker authority: their professional and topical expertise, and their pedagogical practices.

Much like actors perfecting an accent to convincingly portray a character as part of their job (Levis, 2005), lecturers who deliver their lessons in a foreign language may feel compelled to adopt a certain level of proficiency to adequately fulfill their professional roles – despite their linguistic ideologies. Indeed, content lecturers in fields such as medicine or tourism who teach courses in English despite having a B2 level of proficiency face a dual challenge. On the one hand, they must address how they teach the content effectively, with outcomes largely dependent upon their pedagogical expertise. On the other hand, as experts in fields different from the English language, they must address language aspects, even though they may feel ill-prepared to serve as linguistic role models. This concern is particularly salient given that they are often the first to pronounce technical and specialized vocabulary in English for students (Martin-Rubió & Diert-Boté, 2023).

Turning to the participants in this study, EFL teachers might be expected to hold even higher standards for the language, given that English is their area of expertise. Knowledge of phonology and pronunciation teaching techniques, for instance, may give these teachers the confidence to help their students "despite their L2 accent" (Gordon & Barrantes-Elizondo, 2024, p. 13). Some of the instructors in Diert-Boté et al. (2026) and in Gordon and Barrantes-Elizondo (2024) show low self-concept and an ambivalence in relation to nativeness, idealizing it while

 
Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

attempting to accept their nonnative status. However, they realize that their pedagogical skills and technical knowledge about pronunciation can be effective with their pupils. This is precisely what we expect our participants to experience: they are preparing for a profession where they will be viewed as language experts and expected to help students improve their proficiency, and their success in this role will largely depend on their language (self-)beliefs, which are shaped by years of emotional effort and social experiences.

### 2.2 EFL self-concept

Self-concept has been a pivotal area of research in educational psychology, with implications for understanding learners' and teachers' motivations, achievements, and overall experiences in academic settings (Diert-Boté, 2023; Marsh & Martin, 2011). Pajares and Shunk (2005) define self-concept as a "self-description judgement that includes an evaluation of competence and the feelings of self-worth associated with the judgement in question" (p. 105). Therefore, self-concept differs from related constructs like self-esteem and self-efficacy. While self-esteem refers to global self-evaluations and self-efficacy focuses on context-specific tasks, self-concept combines affective and cognitive elements and is specific to a certain subject area, or domain (Mercer, 2011a). The focus on specific domains represents a shift in self-concept research from a unidimensional view (a single general self-concept) to a more nuanced multidimensional and hierarchical model (Shavelson et al., 1976). This model recognizes that individuals maintain distinct self-concepts across different domains, whether academic or non-academic. Academic self-concept specifically relates to one's self-perception and evaluation of one's academic abilities (Marsh & Craven, 2006), with a distinction between math and verbal domains (Marsh & Shavelson 1985), the latter encompassing foreign language self-concept.

Research has shown that self-concept is, indeed, both stable and dynamic, a phenomenon Mercer (2011b) refers to as "dynamic stability". In fact, Markus and Wurf (1987) introduced the term "working self-concept" as "a continually active, shifting array of accessible self-knowledge" (p. 306). This is because, whilst individuals continually develop self-concepts using both internal and external frames of reference (Marsh, 1986), the concept of personality –defined as "a more or less stable and enduring organization of a person's character" (Eysenck, 1971, p. 2)– suggests an inherent degree of equilibrium and coherence. In view of her findings in the foreign language learning domain, Mercer (2011b) argues that self-concept is best conceptualized through the lens of complex dynamic systems, where even seemingly stable systems undergo change arising from the continuous interaction of cognitive, affective, social, and environmental factors.

In the context of foreign language learning, self-concept assumes a unique significance. Mercer (2011a) defines EFL self-concept as one's "self-perceptions regarding their competence and potential in using and learning the English language" (p. 14). This definition underscores the role of language-specific self-concept as an integral part of a user's overall identity, shaped by their experiences in formal and informal language learning settings. It also points to the multifaceted nature of EFL self-concept, with various factors interplaying with one's EFL self-concept. Mercer (2011a), extending Marsh's (1986) internal/external frame of reference model to EFL self-concept, found that internal influences include comparisons between different subjects, languages, and skills, along with personal beliefs about specific languages and language learning

 
Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

in general. External frames encompass social comparisons, feedback from significant others, perceived successes and failures, and prior experiences with learning or using languages in diverse settings. Indeed, more recent research in this area underscores the critical role of internal and external influences on EFL self-concept (Diert-Boté, 2023; Roiha et al., 2024; Yoshida, 2013), particularly learning experiences, with positive experiences nurturing a strong and positive self-concept, while negative experiences result in a less positive self-view.

The exploration of self-concept is particularly relevant when considering pre-service EFL teachers, who navigate the dual roles of students and emerging educators. Their academic self-concept, therefore, might influence not only their performance as learners but also their potential to succeed as future educators. As Arnold (2007) highlights, a low self-concept can drain energy and focus, undermining motivation and task performance. Hence, understanding and fostering self-concept in pre-service EFL teachers is essential for their development as confident, capable language educators.

## 3. THE STUDY

### 3.1 Aim and research questions

The present paper aims to capture the construction of pre-service English language teachers' language (underlying) ideologies and EFL self-concepts, examining how they position themselves in relation to native and non-native norms. Additionally, it seeks to explore the sociocultural factors that shape and interact with these ideologies and self-concepts, shedding light on the broader contextual influences that contribute to their professional identity development. Accordingly, the following research questions (RQs) guide the study:

RQ 1: What are the language ideologies and EFL self-concepts of four pre-service English language teachers and how are these interconnected?

RQ 2: What sociocultural factors interplay with their ideologies and self-concepts?

### 3.2 Data collection and participants

Our paper draws on data from a funded 3-year research project that explores the evolution of language ideologies and practices in the education of pre-service EFL teachers from an English ELF perspective (Cavalheiro et al., 2021). The project seeks to document the development of the spectrum of language ideologies and attitudes of future teachers of English (Otheguy et al., 2015), particularly the changes that emerged in their positionings across all four years of their BA in English Studies and MA in English Language Teaching at two Spanish universities (one in Catalonia and one in Andalusia).



Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

The data for this article consist of four semi-structured interviews with two students from the Universitat de Lleida (UdL) and two from the Universidad de Málaga (UMA) (Table 1 below), whose anonymity has been preserved through pseudonyms. Although it was agreed that the interview would use a semi-structured approach, a list of guiding questions was put together. The themes sketched were: (i) linguistic biography (and trajectory), (ii) stays abroad, (iii) ELF, and (iv) teaching experience. The two interviews at UdL were conducted by a member of the project team, whereas the two at UMA were conducted by two fourth year students hired specifically for this task. The interviews in Lleida were conducted in Catalan, whereas those in Málaga were conducted in English, based on the participants' preferences. Table 1 summarizes the participants' data.

| Participant | Setting | Languages reported | Year | Int. duration |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alfonso | UdL | Catalan, Spanish, English, Portuguese | 1 | 73' 34'' |
| Ana | UMA | Spanish, English | 1 | 32' 29'' |
| Laila | UdL | Arabic, Amazigh, Catalan, Spanish, English | 3 | 44' 22'' |
| Nacho | UMA | Galician, Spanish, English | 3 | 29' 21'' |

**Table 1.** Participants' data

### 3.3 Data analysis

In order to represent and illustrate their subjectivities, students shared a number of "small stories" that provided insight into their lived experiences with English and its role in their academic and professional journeys. These were analyzed through Narrative Positioning. Georgakopoulou (2006) defines small stories as "underrepresented narrative activities" which, focusing on everyday mundane discourse, encapsulate the tellings of ongoing, future, or hypothetical events, as well as "allusions to tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell" (p. 129). These narratives explore how tellers project a (micro-level) sense of self in specific interactional settings, where available identities can shift as roles and positionings are discursively and dynamically constructed, maintained, and withheld (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008).

The notion of "positioning" entails locating selves "as observably and subjectively coherent storylines" (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 48). At the core of positioning theory lies Narrative Positioning, which Bamberg (1997) proposed to examine at three different levels. Positioning level (PL) 1 analyzes the narrative or tale itself and centers on how the teller is positioned (and constructed) in relation to the characters within the story. PL 2 focuses on the

 
Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

interactional context where the tale is invoked, and looks at the social-relational purposes and effects served by the elements of the narrative, that is, the telling (why the story is told in a particular way and what its relevance to the here-and-now of the conversational moment is). PL 3 examines the configuration of the teller's sense of self, (i) analyzing how the local identities constructed within the story (mis)align with more dominant and wider societal narratives, and (ii) exploring the larger sociocultural context where the story is embedded. Although small and context-specific, these narratives often mirror bigger discourses, which can be either reproduced or questioned through their telling (Georgakopoulou, 2006).

## 4. FINDINGS

In this section, we present our findings by illustrating each participant's EFL self-concept and ideology regarding ELF-native-speakerism, emphasizing how these aspects are narratively constructed and conveyed through small stories.

### 4.1 Laila: "*Després d'estudiar que això no funciona així…*"

Laila is a third-year student at UdL. She speaks Moroccan Arabic and Amazigh with her parents; Catalan with her brothers and some friends; Spanish with some other friends; and English at the university and on social media. However, she explains that with her brothers and university friends, "*barregem tota la estona*" ("we mix/language all the time"), something she finds very natural. Sometimes she does it for fun; sometimes because she cannot retrieve a word in the language she is speaking at that moment; and sometimes because a word sounds nicer in the other language.

When it comes to English, she has a very positive self-concept, but there are contexts in which she feels insecure, to the point she wonders whether her English competence really is as good as she thinks. In 4m33s of the interview, she shares a small story (see excerpt 1.1 below) that may be conducive to understanding her self-concept as dependent upon the nativeness of her interlocutor.

***Excerpt 1.1***

1 Laila *jo er em considero er que parlo bé l'anglès però per exemple una vegada un senyor em va parar al carrer i em va* <fast> *em va a la meva ciu- o sea al meu poble* </fast> (.) *i em va dir que sas on està això/ amb anglès* (.) *jo no vai saber què dir i vai dir* <@> *no sé* </@> *en plan no ho deia perquè és que no em surtien les paraules perquè ere una persona nativa* (.) *i jo no vai saber com dir-li però jo sabia dir-li però no s- no em surtien les paraules i em va donar molta ràbia p- en lloc de er arriscar-me vai decidir dir-li* <@> *no no ho sé jo tampoc soc d'aquí* </@> *i ja està*

2 Int. *i després te vas sentir malament*

3 Laila *vai dir jolin però si jo sé parlar podrie haver ajudat però* (.) *pues no*

4 Int. *te va com imposar el fet de que fos nadiu o:/*

5 Laila *clar perquè dic a vere què dic jo ara* (.) *saps/ a veure si ho diré malament*



Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

6 Int. *ja:*
7 Laila *preferie no dir res*
8 Int. *ostras*

On one occasion, a man asked Laila in her village, in English, for directions to a certain place in the village, and Laila found she could not answer. She was lost for words, because the man in question was a native speaker of English, and she did not want to risk making a mistake in her answer. Later in the interview, Laila argues that sometimes she feels "*intimidada*" ("intimidated") by university lecturers, whereas she has no problem speaking English to friends or when using social media. Laila places native speakers and university lecturers in a position of authority, and that puts pressure on her. When asked if she has encountered lecturers with a low level of English, she argues that she has the feeling that although their English is correct, there is at least one that has a Catalan accent, and this is something that she did not expect and finds surprising: she expected university lecturers not to have such a discernible accent.

Laila, as mentioned above, is in year 3 and has received a lot of input about the native speaker bias. In 14m18s of the interview (excerpt 1.2 below), the interview revolves around native teachers:

***Excerpt 1.2***

1 Int. *has tingu:t algun professo:r nadiu d'anglè:s/*
2 Laila *no*
3 Int. *alguna vegada i t'hagués agradat/*
4 Laila (1.1) *sí o sigui jo bueno clar abans d'estudiar això dels natius i no sé què* (.) *jo pensave pues que serie com a millor no/ en plan perquè llavors no se li escape cap paraula en català: en castellà: explique tal qual amb anglès i p- se'm pot pegar la pronú:ncia i tal però clar* <clicks tongue> *després d'estudiar que això no funciona així* (.) *pues ja dius ah bueno pues no cal en plan ara jo no tinc ganes de teni:r un professor nadiu o no nadiu perquè és que els que no són nadius pues* <clicks tongue> *ja són bastant bons i: ja t'ensenyen bé* (.) *llavors* (.) *ara ja: ja no tinc interès*

Laila is asked whether she has ever had a native speaker as a teacher of English, and she says she has not. She is asked whether she would have liked to have one, and she initially constructs a past hypothetical narrative about what she *used to think* before. In that scenario, she imagined that having a native teacher would have been better because a native English-speaking teacher (NEST) would not resort to Catalan and Spanish to explain things and because she would be able to acquire "the" pronunciation. Nevertheless, as she moves through her story, she then clarifies that that was before being taught that this is not how things work. Now she knows, because she has been told by university lecturers (also figures of authority), that non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) are good enough and teach you well. To some extent, it seems she is echoing an external ELF discourse, a "learned" rather than "lived" dogma. This is repeatedly invoked throughout her interview and thus it highlights the tension that arises between what she used to believe (and may still believe) and what she has now been encouraged to believe. Overall, Laila not only recounts her evolving perspective but also negotiates her identity as an informed language learner who critically engages with language ideologies rather than passively accepting them.



Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

### 4.2 Nacho: "As long as I can communicate it would be fine"

Nacho, a year-three student at UMA, is from Galicia and speaks Galician, Spanish, and English. When asked in which languages he considers himself to have a native-level proficiency, Nacho replies: "I speak Spanish and English and then I'm from Galicia so I speak Galician". He initially begins to mention other languages he knows at a lower level but stops to confirm the question ("native right/"), and upon receiving confirmation, he says, "Yeah, I don't think any others". There is no visual footage to determine the extent to which the interviewer is surprised about his answer, but he seeks clarification, asking: "Okay, so you would say you do have a native level in Spanish English and Galician/", to which Nacho confidently states: "Yeah", and the interviewer accepts ("Okay"). This exchange suggests that Nacho equates "proficient level" with "native language", which may have been unexpected by the interviewer. This perception, in turn, is indicative of the participant's strong self-concept regarding his proficiency in English.

At 14m10s, the interviewer reads a question verbatim to Nacho: "do you try to imitate one particular accent when you speak English/":

***Excerpt 2.1***

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Int. | and what about your accent/ do you try to imitate one particular accent when you speak English/ |
| 2 | Nacho | e:r I used to try to imitate (.) like a proper English accent but (.) sometimes I don't know I feel weird about saying I mean (0.9) hh I have_ I don't think I have a very strong (.) Spanish accent I'm_ I'm not sure about that (.) people have told me e:r like in my Erasmus trip (.) that they didn't realize I was Spanish hh but I get_ I feel weird about trying to say Spanish names for example (.) with (.) like in in an English way like Madrid [pronounced as in Spanish] saying Madrid [pronounced in English] (.) I don't know it just feels weird (.) so I try to avoid it (1.0) I used to ch_ I used to say it in an English way but I don't anymore |

In this excerpt, Nacho responds by recounting a small story about his past efforts to imitate a "proper English accent". As he speaks, Nacho engages in a subtle process of positioning: he first introduces the idea that he used to imitate an English accent, then shifts to expressing discomfort with certain forms of imitation –particularly, pronouncing Spanish city names with an English accent. However, before completing this sentence, he feels the need to clarify that he does not have a strong Spanish accent when speaking English. Aware that this overt expression of his high self-concept may be perceived as self-praise, he minimizes the claim ("I'm not sure about that") and subsequently uses external voices to distance himself from the judgment (individuals he encountered during his Erasmus experience who remarked that they did not immediately recognize him as Spanish). Once this has been clarified, he finishes his example of "weird", unnecessary accent imitation, noting that he no longer pronounces "Madrid" with an English accent.

This Erasmus stay that Nacho references in his account took place in Sweden for four months. There, he realized he could talk to people "who were at his same level", which made him realize there was no need to hold back. Nacho adheres in a robust way to the intelligibility principle ("I'm not very worried about being perfectly correct or following a set variant"), which probably gained momentum during his stay abroad. Furthermore, when asked whether he picked Sweden because of the high level of English of people there, he admits that he would "stay away

 
Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

from countries with a very bad level of English" but clarifies that his decision was not necessarily driven by a preference for studying in a country where English is the native language, such as the United Kingdom. Instead, he had selected Sweden because of the university's academic prestige and the expectation that he would be able to communicate effectively in English there. As he puts it: "I think as long as I can communicate, I think I would be fine".

While Nacho largely embraces the intelligibility principle, his beliefs do not extend uniformly across all domains. One area where his stance is more nuanced is language teaching, particularly for young learners. Although he indicates no preference for a specific accent, he argues that when it comes to teaching English to children, only English should be employed, accents should not be mixed ("I would like to keep it consistent"), and non-native accents should be avoided. While he acknowledges that all of this is more than welcome once a certain level has been attained, he maintains that the first steps of language learning should follow this process.

### 4.3 Ana: "You can change along the way of learning English"

Ana's idealization of native speaker norms is evident throughout the interview, with her overtly expressing a preference for NESTs on numerous occasions. This materializes in her discourse in the form of a highly favorable image of their accent as well as overall immersion in the (real) English culture and lifestyle. NNESTs, for instance, may be subjected to closer scrutiny because they lack what Ana seems to consider a proper and authentic –"correct and accurate", in her words– English accent. She states, "it's something that sometimes you miss [with NNESTs] because it's something that is harder to achieve as a teacher from Spain".

It is through this lens, heavily influenced by traditional native speaker norms, that Ana constructs her EFL self-concept. If it is not possible to approximate a native-like accent –which she perceives as difficult– she believes that the next best course of action is to try to "make [one's] accent as close to them as possible". Though she recognizes that non-native speakers "can also achieve a high level of English", her choice of pronoun –*them*– covertly underscores how she distances herself from this ideal and authentic English-speaking community, which reflects the "not" ideology discussed by McCambridge and Saarinen (2015). Despite not consciously attempting to imitate a particular variety and claiming that her accent "just comes out natural to [her]", her sense of ongoing development is evidenced by her aspiration to "kind of do like a native accent" and avoid "showing that I'm from Spain".

While it might be reasonable to assume that Ana aligns her positioning with that of a lifelong learner of English, her underlying aspiration towards a native-speaker model is also infused with confidence. Ana's self-concept, therefore, appears to be situated at the intersection of confidence and inadequacy. On the one hand, her stay in the US fostered a sense of achievement in her ability to use English as "a way of communication rather than just a language at school", which was her goal during her sojourn in the US. In this sense, she discursively constructs her stay abroad as an opportunity to both "approach real English", and gain (self-reported) oral fluency.

On the other hand, her discourse reflects an internalized belief that to "do English in the correct patterns", she must approximate native speaker norms. At any rate, it is worth noting that



Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

she is aware that since individuals are influenced by their dynamic experiences, namely, exposure to different environments and speakers, "you can change along the way of learning English". This may be suggestive of the complexity of her self-concept, shaped –and nurtured– by the ongoing negotiation between the rigid structures of native speaker ideals and the belief that accentedness –and language learning, more broadly– are both marked by the stability of native speaker norms and the fluctuating nature of language as a tool for communication.

Ana may be trying to reconcile two seemingly conflicting goals in her language learning journey: her orientation towards a communicative approach –where negotiation and exchange of meaning should be the primary focus– seems to clash with a deep-seated nativeness ideology. Ana upholds British "patterns" as the most prestigious variety of English, whose validity for language teaching she overstates, despite her acceptance of mixing varieties in language use. This suggests that, perhaps unconsciously, she regards herself as someone who is in pursuit of –yet is still unable to hold– membership of this ideal and authentic English-speaking community, where extensive interaction with native speakers is correlated with language skills development. Simultaneously, though, she recognizes that her language learning journey may not follow a linear path towards that ideal.

Ultimately, Ana's feelings about her accent may be condensed into the following small story:

***Excerpt 3.1***

> yes well in the U.S. of course because I had I would say a bad accent or bad English hh and people would say like oh you're a foreigner it's like really obvious <fast> and I would say like </fast> (.) well maybe I shouldn't talk or speak in class but also when I came back I had that (.) <clicks tongue> I was really used to talking English and not thinking about what I'm saying but I'm just talking along with what I'm thinking hh and being here is like ok yeah you're just showing off and: <clicks tongue> and that really feel me_ like made me feel ashamed of what I was talking about or speaking

Excerpt 3.1 above highlights the complexities inherent in accent and self-concept as Ana, the protagonist, narrates her experiences of navigating (g)local contexts. Through this story, she constructs her identity in relation to linguistic expectations and social perceptions in two distinct contexts. In both settings, her accent became a source of criticism, a marker of her identity as an outsider: firstly, in the US, because it elicited discriminatory reactions from others that further reinforced how "bad" her English was, plausibly in comparison with native-speaker ideals; secondly, in Málaga, because her accent was associated with a form of "showing off" that possibly led her co-interactants to think they were standing in a less socially powerful position. The criticism embedded in Ana's narrative reinforced feelings of inadequacy and served as a further means of underscoring how ingrained the native-speaker ideal is in her self-concept.

### 4.4 Alfonso: "*Vigila amb això perquè se't quedarà així i després no sabràs pronunciar-ho bé*"

Alfonso is a first-year student from UdL. He has not yet had the opportunity to study abroad but is eager to participate in an Erasmus program in England or, alternatively, in Ireland, Scotland,

 
Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

or Wales. Catalan, which he uses with friends, and Spanish, which he uses with his family, are his two mother tongues. His parents are Portuguese, but they did not talk to him in this language during his childhood, as he explains:

***Excerpt 4.1***

> *sí:: er jo* (.) *crec que és la única cosa que li recriminaré a ma mare a la s- a la meua vida que és va ser no parlar-me en portuguès quan era petit hh perquè em parlava amb espanyol jo suposo que també* <clicks tongue> *de una família immigrant cap aquí pues lo que vols és introduir al al teu fill o a la filla hh a la cultura i tal i que aprengo l'idioma pa que no tingo problemes ni a l'escola ni a l'institut però claro e:r hh és la la l'únic dolent és això que no vai aprendre el el* <clicks tongue> *el accent no el vai agafar mai i mai se m'ha donat bé parla'l l'entenc tot perfectament el: inclús escric algo i parlar-lo el puc parlar però sense accent*

Excerpt 4.1 presents a personal narrative in which Alfonso reflects on his linguistic trajectory and the impact of his parents' decisions on his multilingual identity. He expresses a sense of regret, even framing it as the only grievance he holds against his mother: the choice not to speak to him in Portuguese during his childhood. Within this story, Alfonso acknowledges the rationale behind his parents' decision –namely, the desire for him to integrate seamlessly into the host culture and avoid difficulties at school. However, this early linguistic choice has had long-term consequences. While he fully understands Portuguese, can write it to some extent, and is capable of speaking the language, he feels a disconnect due to his lack of a native-like accent.

When it comes to English, his overall self-concept is generally positive; however, he faces greater challenges with his EFL speaking self-concept, much like he does with Portuguese. Although he regards his writing English level to be "on a par with or even higher than that of his classmates" ("*estic igual que ells o moltes vegades per damunt*"), he explains that in presentations he is below their level, obtaining one and a half points fewer than them ("*en presentacions estic [...] per davall, igual tinc un punt i mig menys que ells*"). He is indeed not satisfied with his current level of oral expression. This discontentment with his English level, despite recognizing that his proficiency aligns with his peers' average, seems to be closely tied to a sense of perfectionism. As a token, he claims he prefers to produce short sentences and make fewer mistakes than use long sentences and have mistakes everywhere ("*és millor no equivocar-te que utilitzar super frases i tindre fallos per tot arreu*"). Alfonso positions himself as a meticulous language user who values accuracy over complexity. Similarly, in the interview, he also mentioned that he has always spotted spelling mistakes quite quickly, likes to write perfectly, and does not like to have writing errors ever, even on WhatsApp. Thus, perfectionism is a core aspect of his language self-concept, as he believes that effective expression must be error-free.

However, his discourse also favors communication and intelligibility, as he points out that one's speech needs to be "understandable". Indeed, Alfonso drifts between adhering to native-like standards, where pronunciation errors are seen as flaws, and embracing a more ELF-oriented discourse foregrounding communication and even accepting diverse accents as identity indicators. At 20m26s, he argues that if everyone had an accent from England, we would all sound the same, like robots, losing the ability to distinguish where a person comes from and their roots. Consequently, he puts forward the view that maintaining one's accent is not "so bad after all" ("*tampoc és tan dolent*"). Nonetheless, the boundary lies in speaking English but sounding as



Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

if one were speaking one's mother tongue: that would not be acceptable. Still, speaking English with a trace of one's identity is not bad in itself ("*tampoc té res dolent*").

Ultimately, Alfonso's voiced struggles with speaking in English can be better understood through the following small story:

***Excerpt 4.2***

*jo crec que també això me ve lo de no pronunciar m'ho va dir un professor a primària* </fast> <clicks tongue> *que jo quan ere petit feia molt el el el idiota dient les paraules son- literal com sonaen* (.) *e:r per exemple en lloc de dir* /ˈteɪ.bəl/ *deia* /ˈtɑː.blɛ/ (.) *i estes coses* <fast> *i un professor de primària em va dir* </fast> (.) *vigila amb això perquè se't quedarà així i después no sabràs pronuncia-ho bé* <fast> *i no sé si és veritat que va ser per això o no* </fast> *però ja me coste a vegades pronunciar les paraules com com hauria hh llavors* (.) *no sé*

In Alfonso's story, he positions himself as the protagonist, a learner struggling with English pronunciation, while his elementary school teacher acts as an authoritative figure. The teacher's criticism labels Alfonso's early pronunciation attempts as "silly", establishing a power dynamic where the teacher's judgment influences Alfonso's self-perception. This characterization evokes a sense of vulnerability, as Alfonso internalizes the warning that his habits will hinder his abilities –a belief he still appears to hold nowadays– and, therefore, the teacher, though seen as a guide, also becomes a source of anxiety. Overall, this narrative reveals a tension between the innocent playfulness of language exploration in childhood and societal expectations for clear and correct speech, personified by the teacher. This reflection culminates in a poignant belief of how early language experiences can shape one's linguistic competence as well as one's feelings of inadequacy, low self-concept, and anxiety in adulthood.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The present study first sought to examine how pre-service English language teachers construct their language ideologies and EFL self-concepts (RQ1). The analysis shows that these dimensions are deeply intertwined and mutually constitutive. Laila's narrative reveals that her self-concept fluctuates depending on the perceived authority of her interlocutor, thus illustrating how ideological orientations toward nativeness influence her confidence. Nacho's account demonstrates a strong self-concept grounded in the principle of intelligibility, yet nuanced by context-specific considerations. Ana's discourse indicates a simultaneous aspiration toward native-speaker norms and a growing recognition of the dynamic nature of language. Finally, Alfonso's positioning exemplifies how perfectionism interacts with both ideologies and self-perceptions, generating internal tensions between the desire for accuracy and the acceptance of accented, identity-marked English. Findings align with previous studies, which found that self-concept is a complex dynamic system (Mercer, 2011b) continually formed through internal and external frames of reference (Diert-Boté, 2023; Marsh, 1986; Mercer, 2011a). This has become evident across the participants' narratives, which highlight how their self-concepts and ideologies were molded by both personal beliefs and other social-contextual factors.



Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

Building on these insights, the study next explored the sociocultural factors that interact with and shape the participants' ideologies and self-concepts (RQ2). The first factor that emerges as important in shaping participants' beliefs and self-concepts concerns the academic learning of the language. For instance, students at UdL are exposed to more consistent ELF input, which has created some tension in Laila as a result of the ideas she had, and probably still has, and the more ELF-oriented perspectives introduced by authoritative sources like her lecturers; therefore, in her case, ELF principles do not seem to have fully permeated. Indeed, her EFL self-concept appears to be dependent upon the authority of her interlocutor (i.e., a native speaker and her lecturers), and her discourse highlights a blend of her native-oriented ideology and a learnt ELF discourse. This reflects ideological struggles, or ambivalences, observed also in other settings (Gordon & Barrantes-Elizondo, 2024) as well as ambiguity in the participant's positioning in the intelligibility-nativeness continuum (Diert-Boté et al., 2026; Levis, 2005). Conversely, Alfonso, who used to play with the pronunciation of words, was warned by his primary teacher that such behavior would hinder his ability to pronounce words correctly. This experience not only shaped Alfonso's beliefs about how a language should be learnt, but also influenced his self-concept, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. In Catalonia, where English is not naturally embedded in daily life, the academic learning of the language, along with the teachers' discourses about it, seems to play a pivotal role in constructing learners' beliefs and self-concepts (Diert-Boté & Martin-Rubió, 2018).

The findings also reveal that a second influential factor on the participants' self-concept and linguistic ideologies development is their experiences outside formal educational settings, like stays abroad. Nacho's narrative embraces a discourse that prioritizes efficacy and intelligibility (Levis, 2005) over linguistic purity, reflecting and reinforcing a positive self-concept –a perspective that appears to be influenced, at least in part, by his stay in Sweden. In the case of Ana, her stay in the US, where she was criticized for having a bad accent, helped her gain significant fluency (and boost her self-concept), to the point that she was criticized for "showing off" her good accent upon her return to her university. Positioning herself towards the nativeness end of the continuum (Levis, 2005), she exhibits a strong preference for native-speaker norms, valuing the British standard and native-speaker teachers for their cultural authenticity and accent, although she shows acceptance towards mixing varieties. These data underline how experiences in naturalistic environments can contribute to the participants' evolving EFL self-concepts and to the reinforcement or rejection of linguistic ideologies that may or may not prioritize native-speaker models.

Lastly, personal traits like perfectionism also seem to play a role in the development of EFL self-concept (see also Diert-Boté, 2023, for similar results). Alfonso's self-concept is deeply influenced by his perfectionism and a critical past experience regarding pronunciation. Mercer (2011a) describes critical experiences as past events in a learner's trajectory that stand out due to the emotional significance they retrospectively attach to their language learning development. In this sense, Alfonso may seem to define his self-concept in relation to an experience that created a lasting emotional impression. He struggles with pronunciation concerns, which undermine his confidence and willingness to communicate in both English and Portuguese. He oscillates between valuing diverse accents as identity markers and adhering to native-like standards where pronunciation errors are perceived as flaws. He strives to avoid mistakes in all his languages, setting a high bar for himself that is challenging to meet consistently, especially in a non-native language.

 
Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

The findings of the present study highlight two key pedagogical implications. Firstly, it is noteworthy that teachers' choices, whether related to classroom practices or the promotion of specific language ideologies, can have lasting implications on how students perceive themselves as users of English. Recognizing the influence of these decisions, teachers need to critically reflect on how their practices reinforce or challenge prevailing ideologies and consider how these impact students' emotional and motivational trajectories in their language-learning process. Secondly, teachers should create opportunities for students to reflect on their language learning experiences, both positive and negative. For instance, teachers can design activities that encourage students to share and discuss their language-learning trajectories, including past challenges and achievements, to identify how these experiences have contributed to their growth and resilience. Overall, the study foregrounds the need for teacher training to equip educators with the skills to understand how their beliefs and practices might impact students' psychological growth and linguistic ideologies. Such training should also enable teachers to foster learning environments that empower students and promote positive, resilient self-concepts in their language-learning journey.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Despite the valuable insights provided by the present paper, they must be taken with due caution, as the study has several limitations, namely its small sample size and cross-sectional nature. While these limitations may be overcome in future studies through a larger participant group or a longitudinal approach, the larger project funding the present research already seeks to address these limitations. Ultimately, these joint efforts will contribute to yielding meaningful perspectives on the complex factors shaping (pre-service) EFL teachers' language ideologies and self-concepts. Overall, through an in-depth examination of pre-service EFL teachers' language ideologies, the present research has unveiled a more nuanced understanding of the complexity and multifaceted nature of EFL self-concept.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by the Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación under Grant PID2022-137554NB-I00 funded by MCIN/AEI/https://doi.org/10.13039/501100011033 and by ERDF A way of making Europe.

## REFERENCES

Arnold, J. (2007). Self-concept and the affective domain in language learning. In F. D. Rubio (Ed), *Self-esteem and foreign language learning* (pp. 13–29). Cambridge Scholar Publishing.

 
Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

Bamberg, M. (1997). Positioning between structure and performance. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, *7*(1–4), 335–342.

Bamberg, M., & Georgakopoulou, A. (2008). Small stories as a new perspective in narrative and identity analysis. *Text & Talk*, *28*(3), 377–396.

Cavalheiro, L., Guerra, L., & Pereira, R. (Eds.). (2021). *The handbook to English as a lingua franca practices for inclusive multilingual classrooms.* Edições Húmus.

Davies, B., & Harré, R. (1990). Positioning: The discursive production of selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, *20*(1), 43–63.

Diert-Boté, I. (2023). The dynamics of an EFL learner's speaking self-concept: Insights from self-reported accounts and classroom observation data. *Revista Brasileira de Linguística Aplicada*, *23*(2). https://doi.org/10.1590/1984-6398202318268

Diert-Boté, I. & Martin-Rubió, X. (2018). Learning English in Catalonia: beliefs and emotions through small stories and iterativity. *Narrative Inquiry*, 28 (1), 56-74. https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.17029.die

Diert-Boté, I., González-Ruiz, J. & Pineda, I. (2026). Identity at the crossroads: ELF-oriented, ambivalent and normative perspectives among English teacher educators. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, *11*, 24. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-026-00400-0

Eysenck, H. J. (1971). Relation between intelligence and personality. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, *32*(2), 637–638. https://doi.org/10.2466/pms.1971.32.2.637

Georgakopoulou, A. (2006). Thinking big with small stories in narrative and identity analysis. *Narrative Inquiry*, *16*(1), 122–130.

Gordon, J. & Barrantes-Elizondo, L. (2024). Idealizing nativeness vs. embracing nonnativeness: A case study on L2 pronunciation teachers' identity. *Language Teaching Research*. https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688241233840

Hüllen, W. 1992. Identifikationssprache und Kommunikationssprache. Über Probleme der Mehrsprachigkeit. *Zeitschrift für germanistische Linguistik*, *20*(3), 298–317.

Jenkins, J. (2015). Repositioning English and multilingualism in English as a Lingua Franca. *Englishes in Practice*, *2*(3), 49–85. https://doi.org/10.1515/eip-2015-0003

Levis, J. M. (2005). Changing contexts and shifting paradigms in pronunciation teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, *39*(3), 369–377.

Markus, H., & Wurf, E. (1987). The dynamic self-concept: A social-psychological perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *38*(1), 299–337. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.ps.38.020187.001503

Marsh, H. W. (1986). Verbal and math self-concepts: An internal/external frame of reference model. *American Educational Research Journal*, *23*(1), 129–149. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312023001129

Marsh, H. W., & Craven R. G. (2006). Reciprocal effects of self-concept and performance from a multidimensional perspective: Beyond seductive pleasure and unidimensional perspectives. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 1*(2), 133–163. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6916.2006.00010

 
Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

Marsh, H. W., & Martin, A. J. (2011). Academic self-concept and academic achievement: Relations and causal ordering. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 81*(1), 59–77 https://doi.org/10.1348/000709910X503501

Marsh, H. W., & Shavelson, R.J. (1985). Self-concept: Its multifaceted, hierarchical structure. *Educational Psychologist, 20*(3), 107–123. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep2003_1

Martin-Rubió, X. & Diert-Boté, I. (2021). Investigating learners' affective relationships with their foreign languages: From amotivation to love. *KSJ: Konin Language Studies, 9* (3), 357-378. https://doi.org/10.30438/ksj.2021.9.3.4

Martin-Rubió, X. & Diert-Boté, I. (2023). (Dis)fluency and pronunciation accuracy in EMI Lectures. In Dimova, Kling & Drljača Margić (Eds.) *EMI Classroom Communication: a corpus-based approach* (pp. 36-60). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003349150-3

McCambridge, L., & Saarinen, T. (2015). "I know that the natives must suffer every now and then": Native/non-native indexing language ideologies in Finnish higher education. In S. Dimova, A. K. Hultgren, & C. Jense (Eds.), *English-medium instruction in European higher education: From the north to the sout*h (pp. 291–316). De Gruyter Mouton.

Mercer, S. (2011a). *Towards an understanding of language learner self-concept*. Springer.

Mercer, S. (2011b). Language learner self-concept: Complexity, continuity and change. *System, 39*(3), 335-346. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2011.07.006

Milroy, J. (2001). Language ideologies and the consequences of standardization. *Journal of Sociolinguistics, 5*(4), 530–555. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9481.00163

Otheguy, R., García, O., & Reid, W. (2015). Clarifying translanguaging and deconstructing named languages: A perspective from linguistics. *Applied Linguistics Review, 6*(3), 281–307.

Pajares, F., & Schunk, D. H. (2005). Self-efficacy and self-concept beliefs. In H. W. Marsh, R.G. Craven & D.M. McInerney (Eds.), *International advances in self research* (pp. 95–121). Information Age Publishing.

Roiha, A., Salonen, E., Salminen, J., Kivimäki, R., & Laakkonen, E. (2024). "I have more courage now": Students' perceptions of content learning and the development of their English self-concept during the pre-DP year. *Education Sciences, 14*(11), Article 1147. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14111147

Shavelson, R.J., Hubner, J.J., & Stanton, G.C. (1976). Validation of construct interpretations. *Review of Educational Research, 46*(3), 407–441. https://doi.org/10.2307/1170010

Silverstein, M. (1979). Language structure and linguistic ideology. In P. R. Clyne, W. F. Hanks, and C. L. Hofbauer (Eds.), *The elements: A parasession on linguistic units and levels* (pp. 193-247). Chicago Linguistic Society.

Watts, R.J. (1999). The ideology of dialect in Switzerland. In J. Blommaert (Ed.), *Language Ideological Debates*. De Gruyter Mouton (pp. 67–104). https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110808049.67

Yoshida, R. (2013). Learners' self-concept and use of the target language in foreign language classrooms. *System, 41*(4), 935–951. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2013.09.003

 
Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131