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Positionings and Tensions Among Discursive Acts in a Colombian EFL Classroom: Interpretations of Linguistic Identity

Posicionamientos y tensiones emergentes entre actos discursivos en el aula de inglés: interpretaciones sobre la identidad lingüística

Katherin Silva-Alfonso
Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Bogotá, Colombia

This article presents a qualitative study exploring how eleventh-grade EFL students in a Colombian private school construct their linguistic identities through discursive positioning practices. In the context of language standardization, students negotiate their identities amid tensions between institutional frameworks and actual discursive practices. Drawing on discourse analysis, positioning theory, conversational analysis, and speech acts theory, the study reveals the struggle between an imagined ideal of English proficiency and learners' lived experiences. Findings highlight how institutional discourses influence students' perceptions of themselves and others, fostering both conformity and resistance. The implications emphasize the need for socially responsible language education practices that challenge hegemonic ideologies and empower learners to redefine their linguistic identities.

Keywords: discourse analysis, EFL classroom, linguistic identity, positioning theory

Este estudio cualitativo explora cómo estudiantes de undécimo grado de la clase de inglés en un colegio colombiano construyen sus identidades lingüísticas mediante el posicionamiento discursivo. En un contexto de estandarización del lenguaje, los estudiantes negocian sus identidades entre tensiones de marcos institucionales y prácticas discursivas reales. A través del análisis del discurso, la teoría del posicionamiento, el análisis conversacional y la teoría de los actos de habla, el estudio revela la lucha entre ideas imaginadas de competencia en inglés y practicas discursivas reales. Los hallazgos destacan cómo los discursos institucionales influyen en las percepciones colectivas, fomentando conformidad o resistencia, y subrayan la necesidad de prácticas educativas responsables que desafíen ideologías hegemónicas.

Palabras clave: análisis del discurso, aula de inglés, identidad lingüística, teoría del posicionamiento

Katherin Silva-Alfonso https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5932-3992 • Email: klsilvaa@udistrital.edu.co

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Introduction

In schools, classifying and standardizing language learners is a pervasive practice that can permeate learners' perceptions and identities. In English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) contexts, these frameworks force learners to negotiate their identities amid dominant discourses of the ideal speaker, as established by local and international policies. This study, set in a private school EFL classroom, explores how institutional practices perpetuate these classifications while learners continuously negotiate their identities within such discursive frameworks. Critical examination of these practices can challenge normative ideas about language proficiency, categorization, and the broader role of language education.

This research problem derived from a personal inquiry during a seven-year teaching experience in which an educational institution openly promoted dividing language learners by proficiency level as part of its English language curriculum. The curricular axis incorporates the guidelines from the Colombian Ministry of Education (MEN) for English language teaching and learning, which aim to develop citizens capable of communicating in English and integrating the country into international communication processes, the global economy, and cultural openness, in line with internationally comparable standards (MEN, 2006). It also aligns with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) proficiency level stratification and adopts the Cambridge ESOL exams to evaluate learners. Therefore, the school language curriculum states the classification among English language learners based on their language proficiency as *basic*, *intermediate*, and *advanced*. As a result, I questioned how the school positions the participants based on an imagined community (Joseph, 2004; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007), the economic discourses of industrialization, modernization, and globalization embedded in the curriculum, and the legitimized forms of English language hegemony, such as English as a global necessity, native-speakerism, and English as a lingua franca (Phillipson, 1992).

At a macro level, I argue that Colombia's language policies promote a European model of the ideal speaker (Rudolph, 2018), essentializing language proficiency while ignoring local linguistic realities (Viáfara, 2016). For instance, the national standards of foreign language competencies (MEN, 2006) promote a vision of bilingualism with English as the only foreign language (Guerrero, 2008) and adopt foreign references with hegemonic ideologies that embody a "political issue that has little to do with language per se" (Guerrero Nieto & Quintero Polo, 2009, p. 137) and that pervade learners' perceptions and representations of language.

These hegemonic discourses include the ideologies of English as a global necessity, the superiority of native-speaker norms, and the promotion of English as the lingua franca, reinforcing a narrow view of language proficiency and perpetuating inequalities among languages. Consequently, English language teaching policies in Colombia shape learners' identities (Escobar Alméciga, 2013) by instilling a sense of belonging to a global community that values English proficiency while simultaneously marginalizing local cultural identities. Hence, there is a tense interplay between students' global expectations to conform to these hegemonic ideals and their local realities.

At a micro level, I critique the school's English proficiency classification and curriculum, which overlooks language as a social mediator for negotiating race, gender, ethnicity, and class, promoting a binary high–low achiever model based on deficit and structural perspectives. This binary relation provoked students' sense of themselves as *high* or *low* achievers (Pennycook, 2001), where some learners displayed discordance and revealed frustration when not having the same opportunities as students from higher-level classes.

Thus, this study addresses the following research question: How do learners construct their linguistic

identities through discursive positioning practices within the EFL classroom? From a post-structural perspective, I explored language learners' linguistic identity construction, departing from the problematization of discursive practices in the school context, as well as the struggles learners face as they traverse back and forth between a social imaginary about language and real discursive practices.

Theoretical Considerations

The study adopts a poststructuralist perspective to critique the practices of homogenization and standardization, emphasizing a dynamic, non-static concept of linguistic identity construction grounded in the idea that speakers use language to define themselves as social individuals and to express their multiple identities (Gee, 2000; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Learners create positions through various discursive practices shaped by their context, which are inherently contradictory and changeable (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Discursive practices, mediated by positioning dynamics, arise from speakers' representations of their realities and their relationship with the imagined discourses about language (Blommaert, 2005; Norton & McKinney, 2011). The interplay between speakers' realities and social imaginaries about language, along with the resulting tensions and contradictions, frames their linguistic identity construction (Norton, 2013). By recognizing identity as the representations that a subject continually constructs of the world, this study adopts a concept of linguistic identity that centers on perceptions of language itself (Hall, 1996; Wenger, 1998). Thus, the linguistic identity of language learners encompasses the perceptions and representations they embrace about language, emerging from their relationships within their speaking community (Kramsch, 1998; Norton & Toohey, 2011). Distinctively, this study explores the concept of positioning concerning the linguistic identity of language learners and addresses the construction of linguistic identity through discursive practices within the school context and the challenges learners face in reconciling imagined notions of language with reality (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Leander & Sheehy, 2004).

Positioning in Regard to the Linguistic Identity of Language Learners

Every discursive interaction language learners encounter prompts a reassessment of their self-concept, worldview, and interpersonal relations. Therefore, students' representations of the world are contradictory, fluid, and conflicting because of their link to the environment and the continuous shifting of positioning from speaker to speaker, which occurs when views of the world are constantly contested (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Discursive positioning practices, in other words, constitute the dynamic core that characterizes the process of constructing linguistic identity.

It is paramount to comprehend how the ideas of identity and linguistic identity construction are constitutive of each other. First, identity construction entails a discursive process in which the subject creates representations of the world by negotiating meaning through interactive positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990). As a result, identities are fluid and non-static, developing through each discursive interaction a subject engages in, weaving together the past, present, and future (Hall, 2003; van Langenhove & Harré, 2010). Identity, therefore, is shaped by the choices we make based on our understandings and perceptions of what the world offers. In this process, individuals may find correspondences or discrepancies (Escobar Alméciga, 2013).

Similarly, linguistic identity configuration acknowledges the function of language as a constitutive part of identity, enabling individuals to define themselves as social beings who negotiate multiple identities. Linguistic identity, then, refers to the representations of language that speakers negotiate, not only regarding what language means to them but also how it shapes

their identities within both their speaking community and the broader social context. These representations emerge from the interplay between speakers' lived realities and the social imaginaries they engage with. For instance, a learner may perceive English as a gateway to global opportunities based on societal narratives, influencing how they see themselves as English speakers.

Negotiating these representations generates interactive positionings, whereby speakers align themselves and others with these representations, thereby influencing their linguistic identities. This negotiation takes shape through discursive subject positioning practices. Through the subject positions speakers assign to themselves and others, they reveal the representations they hold about language and the world around them. As a result, positioning is a discursive process defined by rights and obligations, in which speakers and their identities are continually constructed and reconstructed in interactions, where participants generate subjective arguments (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003). Therefore, linguistic identity is not fixed but is constantly shaped by the ongoing negotiation of positionings in the social world.

In this sense, identities are visible as they are constructed by and through discourse (Pavlenko, 2000). Within discourse, speakers encounter spaces for tensions and contradictions, sometimes opposing and crosswise (Hall, 2003), as well as constant attempts to reposition in response to others' positions (Pavlenko, 2002) across various contexts and at the intersections of multiple axes such as race, age, ethnicity, and gender.

Therefore, when the school's language curriculum aims for students to achieve the CEFR B1 level of English and divides students into groups according to their English proficiency level, it positions students on deficit-oriented prescriptions based on ideal preestablished standards. This, in turn, causes students to either resist or accept these positionings. Therefore, there is a complex interplay between the school's curricular model and students' linguistic identity construction in which students' acceptance or resistance is a form of subject positioning. Consequently, the curriculum not only influences students' language learning trajectories but also their self-perceptions and identities as language learners. The continuous negotiation of these positionings reflects the dynamic nature of linguistic identity as students engage with both imagined ideals of language proficiency and their real-life discursive practices.

Learners' Construction of Linguistic Identity Through Discursive Practices

Learners interpret their histories and social behaviors through discursive practices, particularly how the school curriculum positions them. This curriculum not only influences how students construct their linguistic identities but also shapes their learning experiences in the classroom, which, in turn, affects how they position themselves and others (van Langenhove & Harré, 2010). Hence, through interactive positioning, learners engage in a reflective interpretation of their discursive practices, examining how the school curriculum positions them in relation to language proficiency and social expectations. While reflecting, they negotiate their identities by interpreting their past experiences in light of the institutional discourses that define them. This ongoing negotiation enables learners to assess how they are categorized and to reinterpret their place within the broader social and educational landscape.

Research has shown that language learners' discursive practices encompass a wide range of encounters embedded in both instructional activities and social relationships, which serve as a lens for understanding the construction of their linguistic identities. For instance, Ortiz Medina (2017) found that learners' initial identities as speakers of English—shaped by their experiences—visions of English, and personality traits, are key to their classroom positioning.

These discursive practices generate varied positionings where learners negotiate meaning and express identities in relation to others. For instance, during group work, students adopt roles based on their peers' skills and contributions, positioning themselves as knowledgeable consensus builders or task initiators (Montenegro, 2012). As learners engage in tasks, their positioning evolves through participation, resistance, or collaboration. Similarly, Torres Sánchez and Silva Fandiño (2015) found that peer and teacher approval, along with relationships and group dynamics, influence interactive positionings and shape learners' linguistic identities.

Besides interactive positioning, learners assume subject positionings through discursive practices beyond linguistic ability. The studies by Ortiz Medina (2017) and Torres Sánchez and Silva Fandiño (2015) show learners adopting roles like material builders or class moderators when they feel less competent in language tasks, which reveals how subject positioning extends to social and academic contexts. Positionings like high achiever, low achiever, or native-like speaker arise from self and peer perceptions of language competence. Ramos Holguín (2007) emphasizes how higher proficiency students dominate discussions, limiting less proficient learners and reinforcing fixed subject positionings.

The school curriculum plays a crucial role in shaping language learners' linguistic identities by influencing their learning experiences and how they position themselves and others in their discursive practices. Curricular practices, as demonstrated in the works of Montenegro (2012), Bernal Sierra (2017), and Torres Sánchez and Silva Fandiño (2015), can either foster identity construction based on fairness and inclusivity or reinforce exclusionary practices that essentialize identities. Often, the curriculum promotes an ideal English speaker based on prescriptive notions of competence (Norton & Toohey, 2011), leading to segregation between *high* and *low* achievers (Yazan & Rudolph, 2018). This can hinder the construction of linguistic identity through marginalization, displaying a hierarchy that upholds the superiority of the English language, its hegemony (Phillipson, 1992), and ownership (Norton, 1997).

To conclude, the interplay between interactive and subject positionings is foundational in constructing linguistic identity. As learners engage in interactive positioning within classroom tasks and peer collaboration, they negotiate roles and competencies, influencing how they view themselves and others. At the same time, subject positioning uncovers how learners' identities are shaped by societal expectations and educational policies. Thus, both interactive and subject positionings shape learners' linguistic identities, which are fluid, complex, and responsive to external factors like the curriculum, societal expectations, and peer interactions.

Method

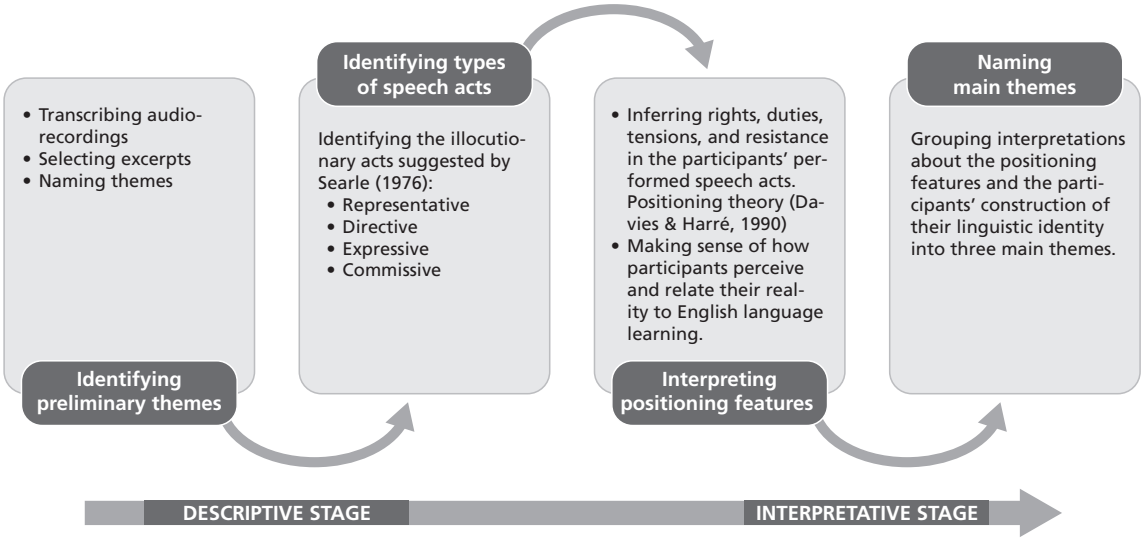
The study is framed as poststructuralist qualitative research, addressing the complexities of meaning negotiation in a social context. From a constructivist stance, the researcher described and interpreted data to explore the meanings socially constructed by the participants in interaction with their world (Merriam, 2002; Rampton, 2007). Within the frame of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2012), the methodological design incorporated the theory of positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990), conversation analysis (Schegloff, 1997), and speech acts theory (Searle, 1969/2001) to analyze the discursive practices in the school context and understand how students' linguistic identities are constructed through those discursive interactions and positionings within the classroom.

The Framework of Data Analysis

The data analysis involved a two-part inductive approach: First, a descriptive stage in which speech acts (representative, directive, commissive, and expressive) were condensed, grouped, and systematized to make

sense of students' discursive practices of positioning (first–second–third positioning, self-other and interactive positioning, tacit positioning). Second, an interpretative stage involved reflecting on the descriptive data to connect the findings with the theoretical framework, highlighting how positioning features depict concerns of linguistic identity. Such a process was carried out through a four-stage matrix in which the data excerpts, the type of speech acts identified, the description of the positioning features of the participants, and the interpretation of how such positioning features depict concerns of linguistic identity were associated (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Data Analysis Procedure



Conversation analysis allowed for identifying patterns of communication linguistically displayed in interactions and making sense of implied discourse practices. So, language was analyzed to determine participants' intentions through speech acts. During the first stage of data analysis, four of the five illocutionary speech acts identified by Searle (1976)—representative, directive, expressive, and commissive—were found. These speech acts displayed the participants' positionings, with representative acts being the most frequent, as they "commit the speaker (in varying degrees) to something's being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition" (Searle, 1976, p. 10). Speech acts were identified, condensed, grouped, and systematized to understand students' discursive positioning practices. Details in talk interaction were subsequently explored to reveal instances of positioning that accounted for how participants construct their linguistic identities (Seedhouse, 2005).

Context

The research was conducted at a private school in Bogotá, Colombia. The school serves students from kindergarten to 11th grade and follows a constructivist pedagogical model known as the Didactic Operative Model. The school's language curriculum aligns with the CEFR and aims for students to achieve a B1 proficiency level in English by the end of their secondary

education. The English department divides students into groups based on their English proficiency level (basic, intermediate, and advanced).

Participants

This study involved 35 eleventh-grade students aged 16 to 18 who were part of the advanced English proficiency group as determined by the school's proficiency level classification system. The researcher had taught these students for three years and characterized them as engaged and motivated learners. Their active class participation and self-perception as high achievers shaped their attitudes toward English learning.

This division of students by proficiency level influenced their beliefs about their abilities, positioning themselves as successful learners while contrasting themselves with peers in lower-level groups. The advanced group was selected for this research due to their availability and willingness to participate. Their oral interactions provided data for exploring their discursive practices and identity construction.

Data Collection Process

Data collection involved two instruments. Audio recordings of classroom interactions, along with their transcriptions, served as primary tools to gather participants' discursive practices. A total of 10 audio recordings—each lasting approximately 30 minutes—were collected, enabling an analysis of verbal exchanges, silences, and emotional expressions (Cowie, 2009).

In addition, semi-structured group interviews were employed to allow participants to voice their perspectives and validate the representations of their discursive positioning practices (Richards, 2009). Participants engaged in discussions structured around seven open-ended questions about their views on English language learning and the curriculum. The interviews fostered a natural conversational environment.

Participants provided informed consent, ensuring they understood the study's purpose and their role in it. The anonymity and confidentiality of their responses were strictly maintained, aligning with the ethical guidelines outlined by Denzin and Lincoln (2005). By prioritizing ethical integrity, the research aimed to enhance its credibility and trustworthiness.

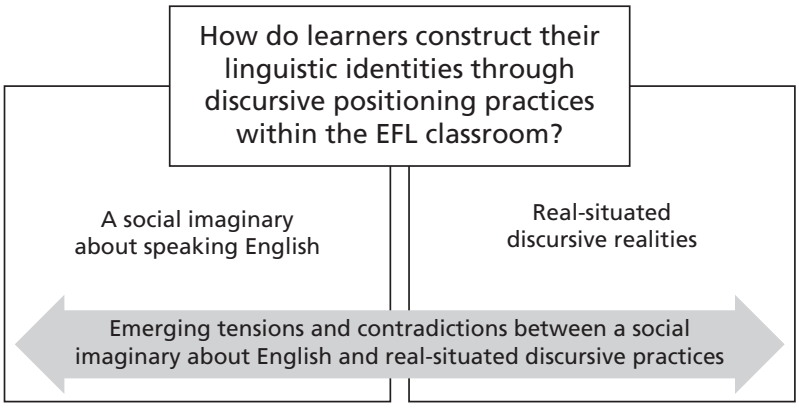
Findings

As "discourses include representations of how things are and have been, as well as imaginaries—representations of how things might or could or should be" (Fairclough, 2012, p. 458), this study presents three themes that explain how learners construct their linguistic identity. Such relationships flow between the *imaginary collective perception of language* and the *discursive realities learners encounter*, along with the *tensions and contradictions* they both trigger (see Figure 2). Learners construct their linguistic identities through discursive positioning practices by negotiating between social imaginaries and situated discursive realities.

A Social Imaginary About Speaking English

Participants are influenced by discursively constructed imaginary ideas about language, shaped by their speaking communities and broader social macrostructures that align with Western anglophone powers' political and economic interests (Phillipson, 1992). These imaginations foster a social order that enforces a dominant view of language, where English is perceived as a universal language essential for personal development and access to opportunities. Accordingly, a social imaginary on language supports another social imaginary that defines realities and reifies a social order (Pintos, 2015, as cited in Riffo Pavón, 2016), representing dominance as it promotes a supposedly "real" idea that drives participants' social interaction and pervades individuals' identities. This belief system promotes language supremacy and the ideal of an English language speaker, influencing participants' linguistic behaviors and identities. Consequently, participants prioritize

Figure 2. The Study's Main Themes



English over other languages, viewing it as a crucial aim for non-speakers and reinforcing the notion of English linguistic hegemony (Phillipson, 1992). This impacts learners' construction of linguistic identity, as shown in Excerpt 1, where participants discuss whether the English proficiency level should be a job requirement.

Excerpt 1

Vanessa: [English] should stop being a requirement for graduating.

Manuela: I think it should be still [*sic*] a requirement because I think that English is a universal language. I mean, if you want to go out—if you don't want to, it is not too important because people could come here—but if you want to have an international relationship, if you want to abroad [*sic*] to the world, you have to speak English.

Juan: So, the others learn Spanish and come here.

Manuela: That is like a utopia, you know because [*sic*]. It doesn't happen like American doesn't [*sic*] want to learn Spanish because…

Alejandra: It is the global language.

Manuela: …because they don't need our relation, we need their relation [*sic*].

In Excerpt 1, participants only mentioned English when discussing foreign languages, adhering to a hegemonic view that legitimizes its dominance. Juan's attempt to challenge this accepted truth about English is dismissed, reinforcing the belief that everyone should speak it as it is globally spoken. The idea of English as a supreme language shapes their language perceptions and usage decisions. Manuela's reference to Americans instead of English speakers suggests that North Americans own the language, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between language and identity (Norton, 1997). Consequently, participants' linguistic identities are shaped by both their views of English and its perceived owners.

Participants categorize themselves as competent or incompetent learners based on an idealized notion of a language speaker (Norton & Toohey, 2011). They position themselves and others as low or high achievers, depending on their representations of a good speaker. These representations are discursively manifested and negotiated in the relationships they co-create with the speaking community they belong to, as seen in Excerpt 2, where participants describe what defines a good speaker of English.

Excerpt 2

Vanessa: When a person has good pronunciation and fluency, you think like this one is good at English, but when she has a good [*sic*] fluency but bad pronunciation like [Teacher R] (laugh), is awful because you do not understand anything and you know that that person

knows English but doesn't know how to talk it [*sic*], I feel bad for [Teacher R] (laugh).

Orlas: Yes (laugh). I cannot understand anything because he is like a little kid speaking, trying to speak English. I think that what makes people good in [*sic*] communicating in English or any language is fluency and pronunciation.

Through the representative speech act of asserting as a fact a characterization of others, participants classify English learners into two types: those who struggle and those who do not, adhering to a notion of English as a universal language that marginalizes diverse linguistic competencies. Participants align themselves with those not struggling, discursively self-positioning themselves as high achievers. This binary view of English emphasizes pronunciation and fluency (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Pennycook, 2001). Through the expressive speech act of laughter, they criticize the teacher's speaking skills, infantilizing his choices as improper. This echoes the school's proficiency-based curriculum division practices. The implications of their adherence to English as a universal language suggest that this belief constrains their understanding of language as a multifaceted social practice and shapes their identity construction in relation to broader societal expectations.

The participants' views on English extend beyond school community relationships, as they praise English language speakers using descriptive language elements and essentialize English into dichotomies like "self/other" and "correctness/incorrectness" (Rudolph, 2016; Rutherford, 1990). This problem arises from the school's language learning practices, which shape participants' identities as learners (Hall, 2003) through a division based on proficiency levels. These practices align with the curriculum's goal of producing communicatively competent students who can adapt to a globalized and market-driven world. Both the school and participants align with economic discourses that present English as a globalization tool. Through representative speech acts, they depict English as essential for university admission and better job opportunities. This entanglement in established discourses about English as a success tool affects participants' self-perception and their views as English and Spanish speakers, influencing their practices inside and outside the classroom:

Excerpt 3

Melisa: It is crucial [for] you to speak languages because nowadays that is a thing that define [*sic*] how you are going to expand you [*sic*] horizons, professionally because yes, I think the interconnected world with many countries or many companies or whether they can [inaudible] many places and they give you many changes you to get more money or much experience.

Sofia: I think if you speak English, maybe the world could be yours if you compare with a person that don't [*sic*] speak English.

Learners position themselves based on perceived societal expectations, projecting future actions onto their constructed views of English. This view normalizes English as essential, associating personal and professional success with English speakers, even if they lack real experience or a high school degree. They also essentialize people, linking success with English speakers and a lower status for non-speakers.

The *English for success* idea reinforces economic and political structures that sustain global symbolic and discursive orders. Globalization spreads English to benefit the powerful while marginalizing other languages (Phillipson, 1992). This process regulates social practices (Vargas, 2016) through narratives like "English is a universal language," justifying policies that promote private interests. English is seen as essential for human capital development, making speakers more competitive (Nussbaum, 2010). Participants' recognition of English as necessary gathers notions of language status, ownership, and success. Therefore, macro-representations of the world influence participants' micro-representations as they construct their linguistic identities.

Real-Situated Discursive Realities

Through the real-situated discursive realities in which participants took part, they implicitly assumed language as a discourse element of identity. In addition to associating themselves with the imaginary dynamics around English speaking, they endorse the idea that their reality is mediated by language as they establish social bonds while negotiating discursive practices. While expressing their representations of the world, they constantly negotiated meaning through the target language while permanently unveiling and constituting their linguistic identities (Lucero, 2018). In that regard, they understand *language as a means of self-expression* through which they can *assess, reaffirm, and contradict themselves and others* in the process of identity creation and *reality-meaning negotiation*.

The participants reveal, both expressly and implicitly, how language helps them embody their perceptions of the world, other people, and themselves. In such a way, they defy a prescriptive conception of language and recognize its value as a social practice. Excerpt 4 illustrates how the participants' real-situated discursive realities shape their understanding of language as a core identity element.

Excerpt 4

Jennifer: I like to speak in English because I think it don't [*sic*] matter what you are saying, it sounds well.
Erick: Sounds coolest [*sic*].
Jennifer: Yes, I mean that it doesn't matter what you say, it is going to sound cool.
Erick: For example, good vibes means *buenas vibras*.
All: Laugh
Orlas: I like German, is [*sic*] cool, is cool speaking in German because is [*sic*] like…
Jennifer: Do you feel like a little dictator?

Through both expressive and representative speech acts of laughing at translating the phrase "good vibes" from English to Spanish, they chuckle since it sounds less hip (Sayer, 2009). Asserting that the English language and its speakers are cooler than Spanish, participants recognize language as an essential part of their identity construction. They alleged that language shapes how they are represented by themselves and others. Similarly, when laughing at Orlas as a "little dictator" for studying German, participants tacitly recognize language's centrality in identity formation, as an "array of discourses embodied with meaning" (Pavlenko, 2002, p. 283). Illustratively, everyone could easily deduce what Jennifer meant when referring to "little dictator." Jennifer conceives language for multifold purposes: language to depict (a) what her representations of the world are, (b) what her representations of others are, (c) how she wants others to represent her, and (d) how she has others represent her in particular ways.

Therefore, participants find real-situated discursive realities as a site for repositioning themselves. Contradictions result from a series of discursively negotiated actions in which the participants assign and are assigned positionings while building representations of the world. As a result, they use language to (re)construct their identities, which can also be a source of inner conflict (Norton & Toohey, 2011). The participant in Excerpt 5 struggles to represent herself when talking about the profession she wants to be in.

Excerpt 5

Jennifer: For be [*sic*] a biomedical engineer, you have to be really social because in biomedical engineering, you have to speak with a lot of people.
Juan Manuel: So now, Jennifer, do you like talking to people?
Maria José and Camilo: Oh my god!
All: (Laugh)
Jennifer: I do like it, but…I like it, but anyway.
Camilo: No, no, explain it fast in two phrases.
Jennifer: I like it, but people are sometimes despicable.

When performing a representative speech act while expressing her desire to become a biomedical engineer and characterizing some biomedical engineers'

must-qualities, Jennifer positioned herself as sociable. However, after the direct and expressive speech acts of asking and laughing, through which her peers position her as a non-sociable person, Jennifer found a site to evaluate herself based on the positionings others attach to her. In other words, she opened a space for identity (re)construction. Hence, participants found real-situated discursive practices as a means to display, justify, construct, and contradict positionings, which in turn mediates their identity construction. Their interconnected representations caused conflict when others placed them differently based on the participants' self-discursive views (Pavlenko, 2002). Consequently, language served as a mediator of the participants' interactions with the outside world based on a dialogical relationship between speakers in which discursive perspectives shift back and forth. Therefore, identities are changing, multiple, contradicting, and sites of struggle (Norton & Toohey, 2011); they are (re)constructed by and in discourse (Pavlenko, 2002), and they are not stable entities because the participants collaborate in the definition of each other's positionings, which they can also resist (Davies & Harré, 1990).

Correspondingly, participants' construction of linguistic identity stems from a concept of language that serves social purposes while discovering spaces for meaning negotiation in their discursive acts. Such negotiation mediates their social connections and tacitly sets aside prescriptive language perspectives, acknowledging the significance of language for socializing. They construct representations of language not only from school curricular practices but also from their actual discursive practices outside the classroom, as evidenced in Camila's words: "Your parents know how you behave in your house, but the truth is that you behave completely different [*sic*] when you are with your friends, and you can be truly yourself when you are with your friends."

Participants agreed that they position themselves and others depending on how others position them. For instance, they claim that they cannot behave in a certain way when being with family relatives because they always judge their actions. They adjust ways to position themselves in varied contexts, adhering to the interstices of multiple axes of age, race, ethnicity, class, generation, gender, sexual orientation, geopolitical location, social status, and institutional affiliation (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). In such a way, participants advocate language to achieve social relationships as it enables them to materialize the negotiated meanings they construct from and about their reality.

Emerging Tensions and Contradictions Between a Social Imaginary About English and Real-Situated Discursive Practices

As previously discussed, participants contend with a tension between two forces: on the one hand, they align themselves with a social imaginary shaped by discourses of English language hegemony, and on the other hand, they recognize language as a core component of their identity. This creates a conflict as they grapple with how English is adopted, resisted, used, or appropriated (Canagarajah, 2017). This tension is further complicated by factors such as the CEFR, the segregating practice of dividing students by language proficiency in schools, and the participants' perceptions of high achievers versus low achievers (Canagarajah, 1999, as cited in Joseph, 2004).

As seen in Excerpt 6, some participants admit that using language to transmit ideas should not be constrained by the homogenous features of formal language. Therefore, they acknowledged the complexity and non-stativity properties of language.

Excerpt 6

Juan Manuel: I think pronunciation is very important you [*sic*] to be understood.

Juan Diego: I think pronunciation is not the most important, the important thing is you communicate something.

Jennifer: Trust me, in relation to all what I have learnt in English, grammar has been useless.

Vanesa: Stop exams and grammar tests; grammar is unuseful [*sic*] [inaudible].

Manuela: You never think, "How should I use passive voice and then active voice?"

Sofia: That is true. One never thinks of that when speaking. One just makes oneself understood; that is what really matters, even if it is not well said.

Jennifer: I have English classes every day, and it is super systematic, and the old man is super systematic and when speaking, trust me, all what I learn is completely useless because I do not simply use it.

While some participants define themselves as speakers based on descriptive language features, others recognize that language transcends fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and syntax. One participant noted the social component of language, valuing both the speaker and the listener when resisting the focus on pronunciation. Tensions arise when participants are labeled with essentializing terms that place them in non-privileged positionings—such as correct or incorrect pronunciation—as they prioritize communication over form. They express their view that formal language components, like grammar, are useless, complaining about grammar-focused lessons. Despite language institutions emphasizing a structural perspective that categorizes students as competent or incompetent based on an idealized language model, participants advocate for communication and function over grammar and form (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Thus, participants' representations of the world are shaped by dominant discourses while fostering micro-discourses of resistance that acknowledge their context and the underprivileged conditions contributing to segregation.

The participants expressed differing views on school policies that group students based on their English language proficiency and the widespread notion of English as a pathway to success. As illustrated in Excerpt 7, some participants viewed these division practices as beneficial, believing they enhanced learning opportunities, while others saw them as segregating and limiting equal access for all students.

Excerpt 7

Juan Manuel: I think that courses must be divided taking into account the learning styles because there are people that do not have the same levels of English, so that they cannot learn in the same way and can make others' learning be slower.

Juan Diego: I think that divide [*sic*] the two classes in advance and intermediate is a bad thing because you are telling to [*sic*] the student that he is not good enough at English. Is [*sic*] like a bad thing because you are saying that this group is better than the other and that is not the idea.

In the discussion, Juan Manuel supports placement despite recognizing unequal learning opportunities. This normalizes segregation, embedding it in the participants' worldview by privileging one group over another. Juan Manuel's indifference reflects a hegemonic view of English. Conversely, as Norton (2000) states, "while larger structural constraints and classroom practices might position learners in undesirable ways, learners . . . can resist these positionings in innovative and unexpected ways" (p. 359). Juan Diego resists placement, homogenization, and standardization by rejecting learner classification based on proficiency levels. Tensions between the imaginary of English and real discursive practices emerge when Juan Manuel adheres to the imagined ideal of English as a tool of hierarchy, while Juan Diego's real-world experience challenges this, unveiling the inherent inequalities the placement practices create.

Among participants, there was a vision of English speakers based on language performance. Linguistic interactions reflected a binary view of essentialized speakers (Rudolph, 2016; Rutherford, 1990) as high versus low achievers, with rights and duties tied to

proficiency. These representations of language levels influenced discursive encounters. In Excerpt 8, high achievers had the privilege to speak, control turn-taking, and correct errors, reinforcing the idea of legitimate versus illegitimate speakers (Bakthin, 1981; Bourdieu, 1977).

Excerpt 8

Santiago: I want to study…*derecho*.

Vanessa: Law! You want to study law.

Natalia: You pronounce it law [ˈlɔː] (correcting pronunciation).

Vanessa and Santiago: [ˈlɔː]?

Natalia: yes

Vanessa and Santiago: no, [ˈlə]

Vanessa: She [ˈlɔː] (laughs at Natalia's pronunciation).

Santiago: and how do you say *leyes*?

Vanessa: Lawww!

Vanessa and Natalia: (laugh)

Vanessa: *Derecho* and *leyes* are the same in English, law!

Through directive, representative, and expressive speech acts, participants assumed tacit positionings as knowers of formal language aspects when discussing pronunciation and vocabulary, shifting from personal topics to language form. English use fostered both supportiveness and segregation: Participants sought help, translated, and completed messages, but also assigned each other roles as knowers or not-knowers of language accuracy. Hence, learners attribute a social component to language, which serves both to build relationships and configure power dynamics. The tensions between the imaginary ideals of English and real discursive acts emerge as participants cross between supporting one another and reinforcing hierarchies of knowledge based on linguistic correctness.

Emerging tensions related to policies that might promote segregation trigger another site of resistance regarding the idea of English as a requirement for life development. In discussing the impact of policies promoting English as a necessary skill for personal and professional advancement, participants reveal underlying tensions regarding the practical value of English proficiency. These tensions highlight resistance to the notion that English is essential for life development, as shown in Excerpt 9.

Excerpt 9

Jennifer: My aunt lives in United States and has lived there for about five years . . . She told me, why to learn English? Everyone here speaks Spanish . . . My sister speaks English . . . She can't get like a job speaking languages, but I don't know why, but she speaks really well. She has the TOEFL that is an international exam, and she cannot get a job and is still a graphic designer.

Although a social imaginary shaped Jennifer's linguistic identity, she recognizes real situations influencing her view of English as necessary for personal growth. Drawing from relatives' experiences, she subverts this narrative, arguing English does not guarantee success, challenging hegemonic ideas (Canagarajah, 2004). Thus, participants construct their linguistic identities based on their perceptions of their speaking communities and the discursive practices they are involved in.

Conclusions

The participants' discursive positioning practices enact a negotiation between a social imaginary, which dictates who they are and what they should become, and their situated interactions within the EFL classroom. These positioning practices emerge from a combination of discourses within hidden agendas, educational processes, and social expectations, reflecting broader social and economic pressures, including neoliberal values that emphasize individual success over collective well-being. Through discursive encounters, learners contend with conflicts and contradictions, shaping their linguistic identities—dynamic, context-bound constructs influenced by the broader social dynamics that govern the educational environment. These identities reflect participants' perceptions of language

as either reinforcing or resisting dominant political and economic ideologies that pervade education and society. Consequently, their linguistic identities are not static but instead emerge through ongoing social practices, with the interplay of identity and language demonstrating a complex relationship that is continually shaped by the social contexts in which learners interact.

The implications of this research extend to socially responsible curricular practices in English language teaching and the construction of teachers' identities. This research encourages teachers to act as agents of change, using language to promote emancipation rather than domination. Further research should examine how discursive acts of positioning relate to gender, race, and social class, and how learners of other languages construct their linguistic identities.

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About the Author

Katherin Silva-Alfonso holds an MA and a BA in English Language Teaching from Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas (Colombia). She teaches at the same university. Her research interests include critical identity and discourse studies.