
This article introduces a special edition of TESOL Quarterly on the topic of language and identity. Norton introduces the topic by relating her understanding of the relationship between language and identity and how that understanding was shaped by specific researchers in the field of applied linguistics. She begins to build an image of identity as something being constantly renegotiated over time, as how we understand our relationship with the world, and as something influenced by power and language. She provides an example of how the relationship between language and identity has serious consequences for language learning and teaching by introducing Mai, a subject of a past study done by Norton. Mai, an ESL student, dropped out of her class from frustration over the teacher’s use of personal narrative from the student’s home country and culture because she didn’t see the value of recounting those past experiences in light of the new identity she was currently negotiating as an immigrant.

After this introduction to the theories of language and identity, and showing their importance in the classroom, she moves to introduce the five articles in the issue. In these articles, Norton finds underlying themes on the topic of identity such as its inherent complexity, as being dynamic across time and space, and that it is closely interwoven with language. Norton also notices different distinctions the authors make regarding identity. Social identity, cultural identity, voice, and ethnic identity were all terms used by the different authors to describe what they noticed in their research. Norton sees value in each of these similarities and differences. Understanding identity as complex, contradictory and multifaceted, Norton feels that each of these lenses can be applied, separately or in conjunction, to better see the larger picture.

From the foundation laid out by these five articles, Norton moves to address questions concerning language, identity and the ownership of English in the field of TESOL. Specifically, she wants to examine the relationship between native and non-native English speaking teachers; how ESL students are categorized; and if TESOL educators perpetuate “western culture hegemony” in different parts of the world. Asking these questions revealed some surprising answers. For instance, it was found that many people in the world are strongly biased towards a preference for white, native English speaking ESL teachers; despite the strengths that non-native
English speaking teachers have. With regards to the categorization of ESL students, Norton realized how powerful it is to name or classify a group of individuals as being “deficient in language and literacy,” and what a negative impact this can have on their identity. Lastly, she explains to us how inseparable language is from culture, and how seemingly innocuous classroom practices such as seating arrangements and activity types can lend to unintended culturally subversive teaching.

In conclusion, Norton emphasizes the importance of the individual accounts on the topic of identity and the ownership of English; she wants it known that the voices of English language students and teachers throughout the world are taken seriously. She hopes that this special issue of TESOL Quarterly will mark a move away from the more fragmented research on language and identity that has been prevalent. Norton ends by making a powerful suggestion that English is owned by those who speak it regardless if they are native or non-native speakers, ESL or EFL, standard or non-standard.

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Norton’s introductory article into the special topic in TESOL Quarterly provides a pertinent examination of a subject that affects all English language students and educators. I often see identity as being looked upon as a static impression that people have of themselves or others, when in fact it is constantly changing by how we continually negotiate our position in the world. Language is one of the most significant contributors to how we negotiate our identities and I feel that I, as a language educator, need to be aware of this relationship.

In learning a new language, you are never just learning a new way to communicate but a new way of relating to the world around you. Language is intertwined with culture, voice, and ethnicity and if language educators are delivering English to their students, they are also delivering other ways of understanding human connection. It is important to be conscious of this as an English language teacher and to always be diplomatic with respect to who your students are, where they came from and what they need. Each of our students has an individual identity and a personal relationship with the English language. The social, political, and economic
positions of our students constrain their use of English. One way to help them realize these constraints is to allow them the tools to re-negotiate their identities; to empower them through the language that constrains them.

Norton’s conclusive suggestion about the ownership of English resonated powerfully in me. English cannot be viewed as the cultural property of its native speakers. English has exploded to global proportions wherein each user of the language exercises their own personal ownership of it. This has exciting implications for English language teaching and I look forward to participating in the field of TESOL for many years to come.