

‘Why English? I Never Felt it as a Language, Anyway’: a Study of Language Ideologies and (Re)construction of Ethno-linguistic Identities Among Sri Lankan Undergraduates

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In Second Language Acquisition, language learning and use are considered social phenomena which reconceptualise language learners as social beings, who are intrinsically linked to their social contexts through ideologies, identities and inequitable power relationships. These factors position the learner in spaces with varying degrees of opportunities for language use. Therefore, the construct of language ideologies and identities are essential to explore the learners’ ideologies and their relationships with the surrounding world. The use of English for communicative purposes among Sri Lankan state university undergraduates has been a topic of concern for decades, highlighting that these undergraduates do not often use English despite their English education for about 13 years at school, and sometimes following it as a subject for their bachelor’s degree. Emerging from the observations of disinclination to use English and the institutional requirements such as English medium instruction, this research explores language learners ideologies and (re) constructions of identities to identify the inhibitive factors related to speaking in English. Data for this study was generated using a background profile questionnaire, identity portraits, and narrative interviews. Using purposeful sampling, seven first-year undergraduates were selected as the research sample of this study. The data gathered was analysed using thematic method of narrative exploration to identify the impact of learners’ language ideologies which were shaped by their lived realities of having limited access to English, perceptions of English as a subject rather than a communication tool and the dominant identities, originated from the influence of their mother tongue. Thus, the interpretation of English as symbolic capital by macro language ideologies may contradict the micro language ideologies, leading to (re)constructions of identities exclusive of English which refute its ownership. This disclaimed ownership of English can expose the factors that inhibit the use of English by learners, an outcome of studying their language ideologies.

Keywords: Capital, Identity, Language ideology, Speaking English, Sri Lankan state university undergraduates