

IDENTITIES OF TEACHERS FROM ENGLISH SPEAKING COUNTRIES THROUGH DISCOURSES ON TEACHING STANDARD ENGLISH IN VIETNAM

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Abstract: The doctrine of English appropriateness has had a great impact on how to teach English language all over the world. However, in this global era, the intercultural interactions among non-native English users outnumber the contacts with the native ones, which greatly challenges the popular discourses of standard English. Interestingly, through analyzing the discourses in the facebook group of teachers from English speaking countries as well as the discourses on teaching standard English for Vietnamese learners on the media, the author has found out that there exists great discrimination among native and non-native teachers in Vietnam, which has already been confirmed in many recent researches in the field of discourses and identities. Significantly, this study also shows that there is a strong internal conflict among native English speaking teachers, about the choice of teaching standard English in Vietnam, through which their identities are constructed - the key factor in international language teaching and educational collaborating.

Key words: Discourses, identity, native teacher, standard English

1. Introduction

Discourse as multi-dimensional concept

The study concentrates on discourses of standard English teaching and learning and discourse analysis of teachers' narratives and discussions. Therefore, to determine the meaning of discourse is of inevitably importance. There are many attempts to clarify the concept of discourse from different linguistic and sociological perspectives, however, my thesis takes Fairclough's definition of discourse as a working concept, which could be relevant to the purpose of the research and to the textual analysis of the data acquired from native teachers' writings and talks:

“Discourse and any specific instance of discursive practice, is see as simultaneously (i) a language text, spoken or written, (ii) discourse practice (text production and text interpretation), (iii) sociocultural practice” (Fairclough, 1995).

Discourses of standard English teaching and learning

In fact, discourses on teaching standard English is very popular all over the world. English is now used more as lingua franca between speakers of English as a second/foreign language - including roughly 800 million users in Asia (Bolton, 2008) than for non-native speakers to communicate with native speakers (Walinslaw & Oanh, 2014). Even in the US, “English only” movement dominates the whole country as a lighthouse of English language education (Lawton, 2013). Besides the discourse on the power of English in the global era, the demand and effectiveness of learning with native English teachers are viral in any

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advertisements and means of media on promoting English proficiency of learners. In Vietnam, the English professional forums and websites are full of job offers for native English speakers ranging from teaching jobs in public, private and personal educational centers and groups. More and more discourses on television and internet showing the considerable benefits of learning English early with the teachers from English speaking countries. The media certainly makes us think that learning with the native is the only key to great success in mastering English which provides us with best opportunities for future jobs and bright career promotion.

On the other hand, there are a lot of criticism and comments of the teachers from English speaking countries about the problems of pronunciation and methods of teaching English of Vietnamese teachers of English. There are some videos even show that is it incomprehensible for the native to listen to Vietnamese teachers making conversations or handling simple topics in English. Moreover, these native teachers themselves greatly concern the application of standard English in teaching Vietnamese learners. Some of them even take standard English competence of teachers into consideration in classifying quality English teachers.

Discourse analysis of Fairclough will be the main framework for the analysis of the discourses which help construct their identities. Fairclough (1995) claims that the method of discourse analysis includes linguistic description of the language text, interretation of the relationship between the (productive and interpretative) discursive processes and the text, and exlanation of the relationship between the discursive processes and the social processes. A special feature of the approach is that the relation between sociocultural practice and text is mediated by discourse practice; how a text is produced or interpreted, in the sense of what discursive practices and conventions are drawn fom what order(s) of discourse and how they are articulated together, depends upon the nature of the sociocultural practice which the discourse is a part of; the nature of the discourse practice of text production shapes the text, and leaves 'traces' in surface features of the text; and the nature of the discourse practice of text interpretation determines how the surface features of a text will be interpreted. Figure 1 shows the illustration of Fairclough’s explanation for this:

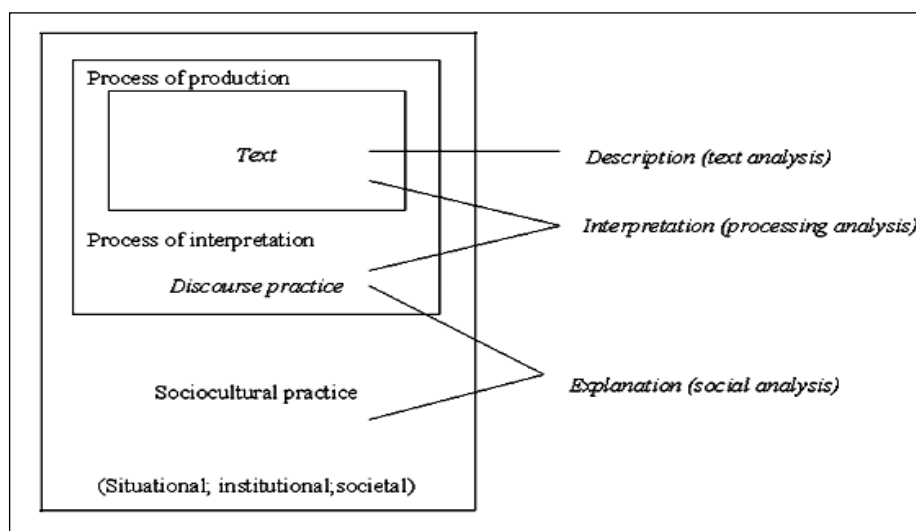


Figure 1. Dimension of discourse

Hence, through the particular replies and comments of the native teachers on their teaching forums and blogs, the author intends to investigate the construction of their identities and get to know what they actually bring to Vietnam in terms of perspective of standard English and cultural viewpoints, values and beliefs which affect the learning and teaching in Vietnamese context.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

Identities of native English speaking teachers

To begin with, Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) characterized teachers' professional identities as an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation of the individuals' experiences. Emphasizing the role of agency in forming teacher identity, they contended that teachers have to be active in professional development since teachers' professional identity is "not something teachers have but something they use in order to make sense of themselves as teachers" (p. 123). They emphasized that a teacher's identity cannot be separated from the context in which he or she is located. Though an individual teacher's agency is critical in constructing her identity, it is constrained by the context.

Recognizing the interplay of the agency and contextual influence in identity construction

According to Bright (2012), identity is always contingent. Rather than something fixed and internal, unchanging across time, identities are viewed as fragmented, multiple, conflicting and contingent on time, context and practices. Identity is constituted through discourses - "ways of being in the world" (Gee, 2011, p.4). Recently, Canh (2013), taking the feminist poststructural perspective in the field of TESOL, has claimed that scholars have come to the conclusion that both professional identities enables researchers to gain insights into how "the theoretical, the professional, and the personal intermingle" (Edge, 1996, p.25 as cited in Canh, 2013) in the process of teachers learning to teach (Canh, 2013). Furthermore, Barkuizen (2014) realizes that narrative inquiry helps us to understand the inner mental worlds of language teachers and learners and the nature of language teaching and learning as social and educational activity. From this perspective, self-narratives, or the stories people tell about themselves, help us to understand the ways in which individuals situate themselves and their activities in the world. Hence, narrative can help to make visible taken-for-granted practices, and structural and cultural features of our everyday social worlds (Chase, 2005, cited in Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010).

Being well aware of the importance of teachers' identities in English teaching, especially the native English speaking teachers, a varitey of research into native speaking teachers' identities in Vietnamese context, which have been carried out using narrative inquiry and critical discourse analysis framework either pay attention to post-colonial and globalisation discourse in confirming the distinctive advantage of the western racial teachers (Ha & Bright, 2011) or concentrate on their lack of initiative in establishing relationships with colleagues. Thus, concepts of identity defined in recent studies on teacher identity can be summarized as follows (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston & Johnson, 2005, pp. 22-23):

- 1) Identity is not a fixed, stable, unitary, and internally coherent phenomenon but is multiple, shifting, and in conflict.

- 2) The primacy of agency in identity formation: away from a structurally deterministic view of the fashioning of individuals to understanding individuals as intentional beings.
- 3) Identity is not context-free, but it is crucially related to social, cultural, and political context – interlocutors, institutional settings, and so on.

My study, which fits very well in this series of going insight into identities through discourse analysis, also takes this definition of teacher identity as the working concept and applies narrative and discourse analysis as the main framework (Fairclough, 1995; Bathmaker and Harnett, 2010; Barkhuizen, Berson & Chik, 2014). Therefore, I approach identities of the teachers from English-speaking countries through their natural discourses of their internal teaching professional online groups and blogs, vlogs in stead of using direct interviews as a single channel. In addition, the discourses being analyzed centralize the topic of standard English assumption and application in Vietnamese context, which is so popular on the media.

3. Methodology and scope of the study

The study involves some prominent discourses on the media such as Youtube videos of Dan, an American teacher of English, and his conversations about comprehensible problems of Vietnamese teachers' pronunciation, the conversations of teachers from English speaking countries discussing the introduction of standard English to Vietnamese learners, and popular blogs of native English teachers experiencing teaching jobs and everyday life in Vietnam. This case study of Hanoi English teachers from English speaking countries proposing of standard English teaching through online professional forums and blogs could only focus on their discourse of standard English teaching and then realize their identities through these discourses, which may not be generalized regarding the whole picture of their life and career in all parts of Vietnam and may not fully portrait all qualities of these teachers in all other aspects.

The paper, however related to the analysis of different types of online discourses, remains one kind of survey research which eventually requires personal in-depth interviews with three native English teachers being aware of teaching correct English and ten volunteer Vietnamese students learning with a native teacher in an economic university to work out the perspectives of these teachers on standard English teaching and how they actually manage their classes from their own viewpoints. Therefore, the instruments of the research are texts, videos and interviews with the native teachers and Vietnamese students. In analysing the data, discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1993, 1995; Flowerdew, 2013) and narrative framework (Barkhuizen, Berson & Chik, 2014) are adopted as the analytical methods. In general, the qualitative approach (Merriam, 2009) helps resolve the two research questions:

1. What are identities of teachers from English speaking countries in Vietnamese context through their discourses on standard English teaching?
2. Which activities are realized in the classrooms of the native English teachers bearing standard English teaching in mind?

4. Findings of the study

4.1. Identities of teachers from English speaking countries in Vietnamese context through their discourses on standard English teaching

4.1.1. *Teaching standard English – in a conflict*

There are both consensus and conflicts of teaching standard written English or practical English in use between the young and non-trained native English teachers and the older and well-trained ones. Many native English speaking teachers agree that some spoken language expressions should not be used in English teaching environment in Vietnam.

Teaching only legitimate English

Michael Piek: “I am perturbed by teachers using the words gonna, wanna, lemme, gimme and kinda, to name a few. These words are mistakenly referred to as ‘contractions’. Contractions have apostrophes and are legitimate English whereas these words are classified as ‘vulgar English’... Yes, they are widely used in conversational English, especially by Americans, however, this doesn’t legitimate their use.

Go ahead, call me a grammar-nazi! In doing so you will be complimenting me as, although I make mistakes, it is my job as a teacher correctly to the best of my ability. ‘Grammar-nazi’ is a term coined by ‘pseudo-teachers’ to mask their own inadequacies”.

When referring to teaching English, some teachers even think of correct English and IELTS score are the ultimate goal of Vietnamese learners’ English acquisition.

Adam Teach: “I couldn’t agree with you more Michael. Vietnamese who speak and write correctly, do so very well and it is commendable. Use of these “American’ slang words however does result in lower IELTS score”.

Teaching real life English

A certain number of teachers also take this chance to discuss their knowledge of phonology, culture and theoretical background to illustrate the disadvantages of teaching correct English only.

Austin Weaver: “It is your job teach students the English they will encounter in the world. That is real spoken English. Your students’ listening skills are going to suffer because you refuse to recognize how people actually speak. Those phrases are not vulgar or slang and no linguist would agree with you. Also, it is a matter of pronunciation, not grammar. At least you are not a grammar nazi”.

Michael James Burkhart: “The difference is between the ‘spoken’ and ‘informal’ English and the ‘written’ or the ‘formal’ English. Both must be recognized in order to prepare our students for the ‘REAL WORLD’. For example: people at all levels of society use the words you spoke of. They can be found everywhere in our music and in our culture. - They are everywhere in our society. Therefore, we, as responsible teacher, who want to prepare our students for success in the “real world” cannot ignore the reality of the language nor the reality of the culture”.

Being a good teacher- using correct English?

Some teachers either use sarcasm to show their disagreement or state their opinion of teaching both formal and informal English. Furthermore, a teacher also claims that it is unreasonable of some teachers to classify good or bad teachers based on their use of slang in internal group conversations.

Marty: “Let me say it differently. Anyone who suggest that teaching anything other than correct English is acceptable is sadly mistaken.”

James Davis: “Micheal how you type on a Group, and how you teach conversational English is totally different. Yes slang is normal in conversational English but do not judge teachers based on typing lingo. Yes I personally teach formal and informal English speaking in my classes to children.”

4.1.2. Correct pronunciation of the native - the only key to comprehensible communication

One of the critically hot issue in the media so far is the criticism of an American teacher about the pronunciation of some Vietnamese teachers at an English center in Vietnam which produced some online English instruction videos. A small extract from the video illustrates his assumption that the native English speaker is the standard to evaluate the comprehensibility of the non-native talks.

Dan huer: “Yeah see, that’s the problem that a lot of Vietnamese people have is with the final sounds. Vietnamese people really struggle with the difference between i: and i, Course, that’s a... phraseology is weird for us, too, and it’s kind of an odd... The problem is with her grammar. We wouldn’t say, “Students don’t hit like”, we would say ‘Students aren’t hitting like”.

4.1.3. Comfortable engagement in English teaching environment

Being well aware that they are native speakers, the teachers are experiencing new culture and exploring themselves to enjoy meaningful and relaxing life despite having no prior teaching qualifications or experience.

Early engagement in the teaching profession in Vietnam

- Qualification-free

William Lake, American: “As long as you are a native English speaker, it doesn’t matter too much. A TEFL isn’t necessary, but usually preference is given to applicants that do have a TEFL, so you might want to consider getting one. You can do internationally recognised CELTAs in Vietnam though.”

- No prior experience

Mathew, American: “There were many days where I could not believe what I was doing as I haven’t involved in teaching occupation before. Living in Vietnam was the biggest adventure of my life so far... I learned that I can get by on my own and that challenge is to be embraced. I can do it and so can you. People’s ambitions and lives are similar all over the world. Living and working in another country helps break stereotypes and helps to form bonds that will result in life-long friends that will stretch beyond country borders.”

- No previous preparation

Frances, British: “Now, try and tell me this doesn’t sound appealing to a young girl with a dream to see the world, working full time but getting nowhere saving money in the UK. Add in that I’m a recent university graduate without a set career path or clear idea of what they want to do and here I am! I am lucky that I don’t have any ties to the Scotland: no mortgage or careers to leave behind. If you are in a similar situation, then there is literally no better time than the present to take on a new adventure and teach English in Vietnam!”

- Reliable jobs available

Kirstie Woodward, American: “Vietnam is a crazy place to live in but an amazing place to teach English. It’s easy to immerse yourself into the Vietnamese culture and it’s becoming a more westernised country every day. Vietnam is a hub for teaching; there are teaching opportunities everywhere you look without high qualifications or previous experience. You hear some horror stories about not getting paid on time but for the majority of jobs, there are some pretty reliable companies to work for. The beauty is that Vietnam is becoming a popular tourist destination which means more and more people want to learn English. You can find opportunities in schools, language centres and private tuition...”

Later engagement with teaching profession

The teachers even suppose that teaching could be easy and useful for their next career path other than being a teacher of English permanently.

- As a bridge for better career opportunities

Sherry Ott, American: “... I used my time in Vietnam to develop into an entrepreneur; something I never would have had the time to tackle when I was in my old corporate position... However I also found it was important to really be immersed in both communities as the ESL community seemed more connected and integrated into the local community which I loved. It took a while, but eventually I had a whole diverse group of friends including expats, ESL teachers, other single women, and local Vietnamese. In the end, I learned that running a classroom was much like running a meeting. It improved my presentation skills, and by the end of the year I had become quite comfortable with public speaking and had honed my leadership and entrepreneurial skills further. These were all things that would be valuable if I wanted to go back into a corporate career. By sticking through the hard times and adjustment period, I had grown as a teacher, a businessperson, as a friend, and I had gained some great swing dancing moves!”

4.2. The activities are realized in the classrooms of the native English teachers bearing standard English teaching in mind

4.2.1. Innovative and pronunciation-focused teaching practice

Findings from in-depth interviews about what actually happen in the English class show that the focus is only on speaking and pronouncing individual words from some random textbooks or unsystematic simple handouts. Regardless of being aware of standard English teaching, these teachers often perform quite informal class management.

More innovative yet less sensitive teachers

Mai: “The native teachers excite us with interesting lessons, but they only teach speaking and they usually talk too much.”

Tram: “The teachers help us correct pronunciation mistakes but they do not always understand us. We sometimes keep quiet as they speak so fast but we love learning with them, it is a good chance to talk to a foreigner.”

Oanh: They rarely use textbooks and they often give us some funny topics to discuss, so we find it quite interesting.”

Lam: “They do not check attendance so we are sometimes absent. Sometimes we ask them out for coffee during classtime and they agree, it never happens when we invite a Vietnamese teacher.”

Pronunciation-focused procedure

Jimmy, British: “...It depends on the program and the student levels, but I focus on speaking skills rather than academic writing. I always talk to them, check pronunciation which is important and motivate students to express their critical thinking in English.”

Phuong: “Most of the lessons are about pronunciation and speaking free topics...”

4.2.2. Students’ tailored lesson plan

In fact, there are few native English teachers who follow quite flexible procedures to fit with different students’ levels. Besides, a handful of native English speaking teachers introduce various activities into English classes of different levels. These teachers co-operate harmoniously with Vietnamese colleagues and find teaching in Vietnam an opportunity to make friends and get to know a new and interesting culture.

Composing a good lesson plan

Mathew, American: “I always had a lesson plan written out on paper, and I did my best to follow it. Sometimes it went well, but many times I changed games on the fly, repeated an activity, or needed extra time to quiet the class. Every day was different. I got very good at addressing a large group of students. I learned how to discipline students, organize them in at their most chaotic moments, and treat them fairly so that they all had a chance to speak and participate. With the help of my T.A., most lessons were successful.”

Balanced and flexible procedure

“I also taught through a system called: “Active Learning.” In this system, students would work with a Vietnamese teacher on grammar, writing, and some listening skills. Then they would meet with a foreign teacher (me) for speaking practice. With young children I was mostly listening for pronunciation, vocab recall ability, and simple sentence structures. It could be repetitive, but it was important for them to interact with a native speaker. For older students there would be more advanced question and answer set-ups where they would have to formulate a coherent answer and explain their reasoning. I would always record notes on their mistakes and successes and leave a note in their book for their Vietnamese teacher”.

Academic English is fruitful at times

“My English teaching experience reached its apex when I met three college students and began giving them private lessons in order to help them prepare for the IELTS exam. IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is a test that many foreign students take to prove fluency and gain access to universities abroad. The test is comprehensive, covering the four parts of language, (speaking, listening, writing, and reading), but we focused on only speaking and listening”.

Informal lessons through socializing

“This experience was amazing. The students were so cool, and we all became friends. We all would go out for roadside phở, lunch, and random hangouts. It helped that they were already close friends and so we all were able to joke with one another freely. Because they were nearly my age, our conversations were that much more relevant and relatable. I was able to discuss a lot more mature subject matters with these students which made the experience a lot more interesting. Our friendship outlasted my time in Vietnam, and we still remain in contact. I can't wait to go back and visit them.”

5. Discussion

First, the findings illustrate the identities of the teachers from English speaking countries as being eager and enthusiastic teachers notwithstanding their lack of official teacher-training skills. They are quite flexible and active in exploring new culture and understanding their Vietnamese students and colleagues. They even involve in fierce arguments on teaching standard English by criticising Vietnamese teachers or other native teachers for their lack of standard English in speaking and writing, which is confirmed in Bright (2012).

While discussing, the classification of better and real English teachers are portrayed as standard accent as well as academic writing styles without regarding their teaching methodology or the understanding of local cultures or students' needs. The results well reflect what Thomas and Beauchamp (2011) found in his research that the beginning teachers perceived themselves as fully responsible for students' learning and their self-efficacy greatly depended on their students' progress. However, the constraints of their institutions made these teachers focus more on themselves rather than on students. The study showed that the gap between the teachers' imagined identities and their actual identities was created due to the structure of the institution. Importantly, it could be concluded that these teachers find teaching in Vietnam as good opportunities for them to explore and change themselves to enjoy a new culture and to be accepted as a member of a new community. The teaching job is a golden chance for them to start a new life and bridge them to mingle with a community that they are longing to become part of it. Regardless of some bad experience and negative feeling from the very beginning, these teachers respect the local culture and express their tendency to enjoy teaching and living in Vietnam.

Second, except for few teachers following well-prepared lesson plans which fit different students' needs and levels, what most of these teachers believe about correct English are not always applied intensively in their real English classes. From my observation and from the

results of the interviews, the author realizes that most teachers concentrate on teaching pronunciation of individual words, the speaking activities are quite simple, and the programs are quite random and unsystematic. Though students are excited to speak and participate in most of the communicative games, they are rarely taught academic English writing or standard English expressions. These teachers suppose that standard English means standard accent in their teaching procedures. Thus, despite their strong arguments with one another, their practices do not make so much difference. When being asked about this issue, the English-speaking teachers explain that it is the responsibility of the Vietnamese teachers to expose the students with grammar and writing tasks, while they would love to help students with what the Vietnamese teacher could not provide - the native accent. Actually, this may be caused by the lack of communication between Vietnamese teachers and native teachers (Canh, 2013).

Other studies in Asian context also come to the similar conclusion. Kim (2012) studied stories of four native English teachers at a university in Korea. The native teachers identified themselves as “respected but separated, welcomed but not belonged outsider.” Kim also maintains that the students’ recognition and Native English Teachers’ (NETs’) non-participation in a decision-making process were critical in identity formation. The NETs’ limited participation in the practices of the university and the local community defined them as visitors but not as full members. Nevertheless, from the findings of my study, some English teachers have better social relationship with Vietnamese students and consider informal conversations with students as fruitful and enjoyable.

6. Implications

According to the findings and discussion above, there are always advantages and disadvantages to learning with teachers from English speaking countries. The thing is that teachers should focus on different students’ needs instead of improving the standard accent only because of the fact that Vietnamese English learners have had more interactions with non-native or Asian partners. More skills such as composing correspondences, academic proposals, scientific researches, and specialized documents which are required for the learners’ future jobs, therefore, ought to be taken into consideration in practicing English teaching procedures. Furthermore, the overvaluing of the effectiveness of native language teachers may entail the unawareness of merits of Vietnamese teachers.

Also, the connections with students, which is critical in constructing teachers’ identities (Duff & Uchida, 1997) should not be ignored. Kim’s findings in a Korean university continue to show the importance of participation and agency in becoming recognized as a legitimate member of the community (Kim, 2017). As a matter of fact, in spite of criticism on both native and non-native teachers’ English priorities in real classrooms, and the native/non-native dichotomy, it is necessary to establish intercultural solidarity among teachers and educational experts for the sake of Vietnamese learners, for a better future of English teaching in Vietnam, and for the sustainable prospects of the Vietnamese students.

7. Conclusion

The study, showing insight into the construction of identities of teachers from English speaking countries through various discourses, has produced quite a few meaningful findings.

To begin with, it is drawn from the conversations and narratives of the native English teachers expressing their views of the roles of standard English as a key to comprehensibility and success in intercultural communication. However, in practice, most of them usually pay little attention to academic and more complicated tasks and give priority to pronunciation training, instead.

Although the students perceive that the native teachers are creative and interesting, they prefer them to be more sensitive to and sympathetic with students' hesitance to speak in class. Fortunately, native teachers are also willing to socialize with students and a few of them take advantage of this opportunity to offer informal discussions in English, which is of students' interest. To conclude, it can be said that despite the undeniable effectiveness of learning with the teachers from English speaking countries, Vietnamese educational authorities, teachers, parents and students should be well aware of the native teachers' limitations and distinctive identities, which are likely to influence their teaching practice. The paper also suggests conducting more research into discourses and identities of native English teachers since there is a dialectical relation between teachers' identities and the discursive narratives and other types of discourses.

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CĂN TÍNH CỦA GIÁO VIÊN ĐẾN TỪ CÁC NƯỚC NÓI TIẾNG ANH THÔNG QUA DIỄN NGÔN VỀ VIỆC DẠY TIẾNG ANH CHUẨN TẠI VIỆT NAM

Tóm tắt: Học thuyết về tiếng Anh chuẩn đã có những ảnh hưởng rất lớn tới hoạt động dạy tiếng Anh trên khắp thế giới. Tuy nhiên, trong thời đại toàn cầu hóa, những tương tác liên văn hóa với những người bản ngữ thậm chí còn ít hơn nhiều so với giao tiếp giữa những người không phải bản ngữ. Chính điều này đã đặt ra nhiều thử thách với những diễn ngôn phổ biến về tiếng Anh chuẩn. Điểm thú vị trong nghiên cứu này là thông qua việc phân tích những diễn ngôn trên nhóm facebook của giáo viên đến từ các nước nói tiếng Anh cũng như những diễn ngôn về việc dạy tiếng Anh chuẩn trên các phương tiện truyền thông, tác giả nhận thấy việc tồn tại của sự phân biệt rất lớn giữa giáo viên bản ngữ và không bản ngữ, kết quả này cũng đã được xác nhận bởi nhiều nghiên cứu gần đây về diễn ngôn và căn tính. Điểm đóng góp quan trọng là nghiên cứu này chỉ ra rằng những giáo viên bản ngữ này cũng có sự tranh cãi nội bộ gay gắt về việc lựa chọn dạy tiếng Anh chuẩn cho học viên người Việt Nam, thông qua đó, xây dựng nên căn tính của họ - một nhân tố then chốt trong việc dạy và hợp tác giáo dục quốc tế.

Từ khóa: Diễn ngôn, căn tính, giáo viên bản ngữ, tiếng Anh chuẩn