Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education

Volume 15, Issue 1 (2026), pp. 345-370
Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education
ISSN: 2166-2681Print 2690-0408 Online | https://ojed.org/jise
https://doi.org/10.32674/h30jha30

Linguistic Insecurity and Professional Identity: Mainland Chinese Pre-Service English Teachers Navigating NNEST Identity in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Non-native English-speaking teachers' (NNESTs) identity has long been a research topic in the teacher education field which is critical to teacher education. With the rise of the Top Pass Talent Scheme, an increase in NNESTs from mainland to Hong Kong is expected, yet this has received limited research. By thematically analyzing the interview data from 13 pre-service teachers, this qualitative study aims to investigate pre-service teachers from the mainland interact with their NNEST identity. The results showed that NNESTs displayed linguistic insecurity and professional insecurity. These insecurities are potentially the consequences of a deep-rooted native-speakerism ideology and an inadequacy in teacher training. This study suggests that teacher education should be reformed to promote language ownership and world Englishes.

Keywords: Chinese English Teachers; Native-speakerism; Non-native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs); Pre-service Teacher; Teacher Education; Top Pass Talent Scheme

INTRODUCTION

One significant discussion in teacher education has foreshadowed all the non-native English-speaking teachers- (NNESTs) related research is the idea of native-speakerism, which is defined as "an established belief that 'native-speaker' teachers represent 'Western culture' from which springs the ideals both English language and English language teaching methodology" (Holliday, 2005, p. 6). Many researchers (Holliday, 2006; Jenkins, 2000) pointed out the deep-rooted native-speakerism ideology may negatively influence NNESTs' self-perceptions and identity. As Al-Seghayer (2025) suggested, "the persistence of the native-speaker fallacy continues to pose a substantive challenge for non-native English-speaking teachers, who are frequently constructed as less legitimate or effective than their native English-speaking counterparts" (p. 72).

In the past two decades, scholars have explored NNESTs' professional development and teachers' identity (Moussu & Llurda, 2008; Wolff & De Costa, 2017; Chan, 2017). As non-native speakers, NNESTs frequently experience language prejudice in their teaching environment, which results in self-doubts in their identities as English teachers (Park, 2012). In the Hong Kong context, much of the previous research on NNESTs has focused on in-service English teachers (Lee, 2013; Chan & Lo, 2017; Trent, 2017; Bai & Yuan, 2019), and the number of pre-service English teachers was comparatively limited. Among these limited numbers of studies on pre-service teachers, the participants have always been pre-service English teachers from Hong Kong (Chan, 2016). One of the recent changes in Hong Kong's immigration program is the introduction of the government's *Top Talent Pass Scheme* (TTPS) in 2022, which is a scheme attracting "top talents include high-income talents and graduates from the world's top universities" (Immigration Department, 2025). The scheme has attracted over 111,600 applications from late 2022 to late 2024 (Hong Kong Government, 2025). Still, the largest number of applications was from mainland China—for instance, among the 49,737 applications in 2023, 47,021 of them were from mainland China, accounting for 94.5% of the total number (Immigration Department, 2024). With the increasing number of mainland talents residing and joining the workforce in Hong Kong, there will be more mainland English teachers considering teaching English in Hong Kong.

The increasing number of mainland English teachers then triggers a rarely researched topic—how do these mainland English teachers feel teaching in Hong Kong, which has a very different English teaching and learning environment from mainland China? This research aims to explore how native-speakerism interplays

with the NNEST identity in this group of pre-service teachers from mainland China, which has rarely been studied. By employing a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews to collect data from 13 mainland Chinese pre-service English teachers who were enrolled in a language teaching master's program in Hong Kong, this research analyses how these future English teachers view their NNEST identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The education levels in Hong Kong, including primary schools, secondary schools, and tertiary institutions, have adopted vastly different language teaching policies. However, English language teaching has been a core part of all levels of education in Hong Kong due to its history as an ex-British colony (Yeung & Gray, 2025). Nearly all universities in Hong Kong have adopted a full-EMI (English as a medium of instruction) approach (Chan, 2022). At the same time, secondary schools and primary schools have the autonomy to choose whether to adapt to EMI fully or partially in the past decades (Evans, 2016). The emphasis on the use of the English language has raised the issue of teacher identities in Hong Kong, as there are distinctions between Local English Teachers (LETs) and Native-speaking English Teachers (NETs) in Hong Kong (Chan, 2017). Since 1998, NETs have been recruited by the Hong Kong Education Bureau to work in local primary and secondary schools "*to enhance the teaching of the English Language and increase the exposure of students to English*" (Education Bureau, 2025, para 1). However, the scheme was, in general, not well-received by LETs, and this has created conflicts between LETs and NETs (Chan, 2012; Luk & Lin, 2007; Gu et al., 2025). Benson (2012) pointed out that the NETs are often seen as better English teachers compared to their local counterparts. Ma (2012) and Trent (2016) both argued that these perceptions have intensified the division between the two groups of teachers and differentiated the teachers' identities from only the accents and appearance. In Chan (2017), LETs stated that they believed they were stigmatized by their non-native English accents and felt "*they do not have the legitimacy to judge or change the (English) language and therefore they tend to stick to the (exonormative English) norms*" (p. 103). Chan (2017) further pointed out that LETs struggled with their professional selves in being an English teacher and felt conflicted being a language learner and a language teacher at the same time—which all leads to the construction of teacher identity. Moorhouse (2017) argued that teachers' identities are an essential part of a professional teacher's self in how they view themselves as a teacher. Uştuk and Hu (2024) added that the understanding of teachers' identities is vital for teacher education research as it affects the teaching practice. Teacher identities are also said to be fluid and can change through time and incidents (Moorhouse, 2017), as Tajeddin (2025) described, teacher identities underscore "how they [teachers] understand possibilities for the future" (p. 3396).

Emotions have also been found to be highly associated with the construction of teacher's identities (Yazan, 2018; Neupane & Bhatt, 2023).

Building on Wenger's (1998) theory of communities of practice, as elaborated by Tsui (2007), language teacher identity formation is conceptualized as a dual, dynamic process involving identification—how teachers are socially reified and how they position themselves, and negotiation of meanings—the extent to which they exercise agency to shape and redefine what counts as competent teaching practice within their professional communities. This framework highlights that teachers' identities are not fixed but continually constructed through participation, recognition, and power relations within social and institutional contexts. The formation of pre-service teachers' identities is particularly complex, influenced by factors such as teacher education, mentorship, assistance from more capable others, and teaching practicum (Dassa & Derose, 2017). This study specifically adopts Warford's (2011) Zone of Proximal Teacher Development (ZPTD) model, which extends Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) from child development to teacher education. ZPTD theorizes pre-service teacher identity formation as a developmental process where the "zone" represents the distance between what teacher candidates can do independently and what they can achieve with strategic assistance from more experienced others, such as mentor teachers and instructors. Central to this model is the teaching practicum, which functions as a critical site for identity development, enabling pre-service teachers to transition from theoretical knowledge to practical applications. Through scaffolded interactions and reflection embedded in practicum experiences, pre-service teachers internalize pedagogical knowledge and begin to construct their professional identities. Building on this model, this study thus adopts Warford's (2011) model to examine how pre-service teachers' identities are actively constructed through their experiences after the teaching practicum, with the goal of informing and enhancing teacher education and training programs.

As mentioned earlier, research on pre-service English teachers on NNESTs from mainland China is scarce in the context of Hong Kong. One related study was done by Benson (2012), who conducted case studies in Hong Kong on two pre-service English teachers who came from Shanghai. In his study, Benson (2012) uncovered the struggles that the two pre-service NNESTs faced during their practicum in local schools, in which they felt frustrated not only by the cultural differences but also by the ideological confusion of their identities as NNESTs. Benson's (2012) study, despite the small sample size of only two cases involved, shows how pre-service NNESTs negotiate with their own identities as teachers. Similarly, Brinton (2004) suggested that pre-service teachers tend to explore their sense of teacher-self during their education training. Chan (2017) concluded that Hong Kong LETs' attitudes toward English teaching were highly *exonormative* in terms of accents and usage because they conflicted with being non-native speakers of English, which hints at the presence of *native-speakerism* in the Hong Kong

education system. This paper aims to extend the study of NNESTs' teacher identity to mainland Chinese pre-service NNESTs in Hong Kong, which has not been extensively researched. Thus, this study seeks to explore two research questions:

1. How do these Chinese pre-service English teachers perceive their identities as NNESTs?
2. What factors contribute to the construction of their teacher's identity?

RESEARCH METHODS

To investigate this specific group of pre-service NNESTs' identities, a mixed-method study with questionnaires and semi-structured interviews was conducted in early 2025. In the following section, the details of the methodology, including the demographics of the participants, the data collection methods, and the ways of data analysis, will be detailed.

Participants

The study included 13 pre-service English teachers in Hong Kong, all of whom were NNESTs. These teachers were chosen using purposive sampling, as this is a sampling method that is well-suited to locate participants with targeted backgrounds (Battaglia, 2008). These teachers were sent a demographic survey before their participation in the research, which was served as the basis of the selection of participants in this study. The participants were originally from mainland China, and their first language (L1) was primarily Putonghua and various Chinese regional languages. The age range of the participants was between 20-40 years, with a gender ratio of 2 males to 11 females. All of the participants were students enrolled in a Master's program specializing in language teaching at a public-funded research-based university in Hong Kong. The students had finished their first semester of studies, which included curriculum design, teaching methodology, language learning theories, and language research. These students would then participate in a teaching internship in their second semester at a local primary or secondary school for roughly two months. The interviews were conducted two weeks before their teaching internship started. Table 1 shows the demographic information of all participants.

Table 1: Demographic information of Participants

No.	Name	Age	Language Proficiency	Educational background
1	Camila	20-25	Mandarin (Native), English (Proficient), Cantonese (Intermediate)	BA in Literature
2	Ethan	20-25	Mandarin (Native), English (Proficient)	BA in Translation and Interpretation
3	Gianna	26-30	Mandarin (Native), English (Proficient), Cantonese (Conversational)	BA in Translation, Master of Translation and Interpretation
4	Isabella	36-40	Mandarin (Native), English (Upper-intermediate)	BA in English Language and Literature
5	Jade	26-30	Mandarin (Native), Cantonese (Native), English (Proficient)	BA in Translation
6	Josephine	26-30	Mandarin (Native), English (Intermediate)	BA in English Teaching
7	Jack	20-25	Mandarin (Native), Hakka (Native), English (Proficient), Cantonese (Intermediate)	BA in English, BEd in TESOL

8	Kate	20-25	Mandarin (Native), English (Proficient)	BA in English Language and Literature
9	Lucy	26-30	Mandarin (Native), English (Proficient)	BA in English (General English)
10	Lily	20-25	Mandarin (Native), English (Proficient), Cantonese (Proficient)	BA in English
11	Shelly	20-25	Mandarin (Native), English (Proficient)	BA in Language and Literature
12	Stella	26-30	Mandarin (Native), English (Upper-intermediate)	BA in Translation, Minor in Finance
13	Vivian	20-25	Mandarin (Native), English (Upper-intermediate), Japanese (Intermediate)	BA in Japanese

Data Collection

Data was collected through both online pre-interview questionnaires and semi-structured interviews conducted in early January 2025. This timing was chosen as it coincided with the participants' enrollment in their Master in TESOL program and their preparation for their first teaching internship. Prior to the interviews, participants completed a questionnaire that gathered information about their demographics, teaching experiences, their vision for their upcoming internship, and most importantly, their language identity and teacher identity. These data mainly serve as supporting evidence to triangulate with the interview data. This use of multiple data sources often provides different angles, which helped the researchers elicit and compare different perspectives on the subject matter, which ensures the validity of the data (Julien & Dookwah, 2020; Fox et al., 2021). The semi-structured interviews yielded 469 minutes of data. The interviews

were transcribed verbatim by two trained research assistants and cross-checked by the researchers. The transcription was 48,009 words in length, and the data were annotated and analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis and grounded theory. To uphold the reliability of the qualitative research, or the replicability of the research processes and results (Mackey & Gass, 2021), all the interview transcripts and coding were cross-checked to ensure high inter-coder consistency, which minimizes the biases and enhances the validity and reliability of the research.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the research instrument because of their proven functionalities in exploring and comprehending details and themes from interviewees (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This data collection method is also an excellent tool for researchers to capture nuances and non-verbal cues (Julien & Dookwah, 2020), which is highly relevant to studies related to attitudes and identities. Each participant took part in a semi-structured interview via Zoom lasting between 30 to 45 minutes. These interviews were designed to explore their teacher identity as NNESTs. The interview questions were developed with the guidance of Warford' (2011) ZPTD model that confirms the efficiency of teaching practicum in the construction of pre-service teachers' identities. Therefore, twelve open-ended questions were finalized, centering around the self-reflection of their teacher identity and any teaching experiences that might influence their identity construction. Alongside the fixed set of twelve questions, the researchers followed up with additional questions when specific themes emerged during the interviews, allowing a deeper examination of the critical issues that might differ among interviewees. Such semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in questioning, enabling the researchers to delve deeper into specific areas of interest while maintaining a consistent structure across all interviews (Adams, 2015).

Data Analysis

All the data collected from the interviews were transcribed, cleansed, and coded using NVivo 14. The interview data underwent qualitative analysis, specifically thematic analysis, to identify common themes. Thematic analysis refers to the research method that is used for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Guest et al., 2012). In the current research, the analysis began with the researchers familiarizing themselves with the data, where researchers read and re-read the transcripts to become immersed and intimately familiar with their content. Secondly, we generated the initial codes, in which

interesting features of the data were systematically coded across the entire data set. The next step involved searching for themes, where codes were collated into potential themes, and all data relevant to each potential theme were gathered. These themes were then reviewed, refined, and defined to ensure they accurately reflected the data. As mentioned above, to ensure the reliability and validity of the analysis, all transcripts and coding were cross-checked and agreed upon by the researchers and coders (Mackey & Gass, 2021). This collaborative approach helped to minimize biases, enhance the consistency of the coding process, as well as ensure the inter-coder reliability (Cole, 2024). The use of NVivo14 facilitated the organization and management of the data, resulting in an efficient and thorough analysis.

RESULTS

This section presents the results after the data analysis to answer the two research questions, which explore how pre-service teachers perceive their identities, followed up with the factors contributing to their perception.

Pre-service teachers' identities as NNESTs

To answer the first research question, all participants were asked how they perceived their identities as NNESTs and their evaluations of this role compared to Native English-speaking teachers (NESTs). From the participants' responses, they unanimously perceived themselves as NNESTs, arguably directly revealing their stance on the ownership of English, with the role of language *learner* more than the *owner*, meaning the participants neither felt they "owned" the language (English) nor perceived themselves as legitimate speakers of English (Ahn et al., 2023). This insecurity was revealed in the interviews, primarily from their ***linguistic insecurities*** and ***professional identity insecurities*.**

Linguistic insecurities, first discussed by Labov (2006), refer to speakers' exonormative pursuit of the correctness of a language with the belief that the variety they use is somehow inferior (Foo & Tan, 2019). This idea has been one of the two major notions that were revealed in the current study. The linguistic insecurities of the participants, both "correctness" and "inferiority", were discovered from the participants' various perceptions of their English proficiency. When they were asked to describe how they perceive their roles as NNESTs, all participants more or less answered with their frustration about their English proficiency as NNESTs, which they believe was not as good as NESTs. Isabella [4] evaluated herself as both a NNEST and a second language learner. With the pursuit of correctness in learning, Isabella [4] expressed her insecurity in terms of the potential misuse of English:

As native English teachers, they are, most of the time, 100% (sure) that what they are saying is correct or commonly used expressions in the English language. However, as non-native English teachers, sometimes we are not sure about ourselves, and we have to check. We have to learn by ourselves at first, and then we teach students. So, we are learners, and at the same time, we are teachers.

Jack [7] also held the same insecure feeling about his English language skills in teaching, expecting himself to be *perfect* in English:

I really wanna make the English language I'm using right now to be native level with minimum errors when I use it. I think that's quite important. I think the challenge that I face is that I still think of myself as not having perfect language skills. I still need improvement in vocabulary, grammar, oral, and maybe listening. I still need practice, and I cannot even catch up with the native speaker.

Among the four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), linguistic insecurity is more widely found in listening and speaking skills. This is potentially due to the pre-tertiary education that participants received in mainland China, where speaking and listening were often not emphasized or assessed in China's National College Entrance Exam (Gaokao). While English reading and writing are mandatory in Gaokao, English speaking and listening are inconsistently tested or excluded from final scores among different provinces. More developed regions like Guangdong and Shanghai were early adopters of spoken English assessments in Gaokao, whereas in many other provinces, these tests remain optional or absent (Butler et al., 2022)

For example, Stella [12] believed that she was good at writing and reading but lacked confidence in listening and speaking. She described that she frequently misses information when listening and always makes mistakes while speaking. Similarly, Gianna [3] distinguished NESTs and NNESTs, pointing out that NNESs have lower competence in English speaking:

As for me, as an English (speaker) who is Chinese, an NNES, I think most of the school education that I received was on English reading and writing instead of listening and speaking…we don't have the environment to speak English, and listen to English every day. I think compared with native English speakers, we have lower competency in speaking and listening because we don't have that environment. All our school exams and college entrance exams are based on English reading and writing.

It was hinted that their linguistic insecurities could be the result of the participants' educational background, which they suggested that since they received most of their primary and secondary level education in mainland China,

where the teaching of the English language was heavily focused on reading and writing with minimal attention to listening and speaking.

Furthermore, they often felt inferior to NESTs, thus making them insecure when facing their students. Consistent with Chan's (2017) findings, all participants expressed their willingness and motivation to improve their English proficiency as NNESTs, especially being able to speak at native or native-like level. For example, even though Vivian [13] evaluated herself as a highly fluent English speaker, she expressed that being highly fluent was far from being native in English. She stated: "I can speak fluent English, but I think it's too far from being a native English speaker", expressing her determination to keep improving her English. Similarly, Kate [8] compared her English proficiency to NESTs and, when pointing out the aspects where she needs more improvement, stated:

> *Even though I know I have pretty standard pronunciation, it is definitely not authentic. And vocabulary. I grew up learning Chinese and English just in China, and I haven't had any education abroad so far. So, I do not use the most authentic vocabulary or expressions for vocabulary. English fluency and overall proficiency stuff like that are definitely not better than natives, like a really normal thing. But for us (as NNESTs), I need to think and tell myself not to use the wrong grammar. Speaking English itself is already not an easy thing, not to mention teaching students.*

Among the scope of English-speaking skills mentioned by Kate [8] and others, pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary are the significant aspects that participants were keen to improve. Josephine [6] expressed her intense feeling of insecurity about her English pronunciation, especially on the nativeness issue:

> *Once, when I gave a presentation in [a professor's] class, he told me that my pronunciation had some problems and commented my pronunciation did not sound like a native speaker…After hearing some people's comments on my pronunciation problems, I felt a little negative. In mainland China, I think my pronunciation was better than that of a lot of people and even better than that of many former colleagues. Then, after learning that my pronunciation was not so good, I felt a little unhappy, and I desperately wanted to improve my pronunciation.*

Shelly [11] also encountered the same situation as Josephine [6]. When it comes to pronunciation, Shelly [11] expressed her worries about her pronunciation not being sufficiently native, accurate, and natural, thus leading to her insecurity in her teaching. The participants would try to locate each of the sounds in their inventory in their reflections. For instance, Kate [8] provided examples of the pronunciation errors pointed out to her:

> *The sounds at the end of the words, like the "s" and the "ts" sounds. Sometimes, I will just cut them (off) consciously or unconsciously. But*

when I('m) speaking, I don't notice those little subtle changes. But when I listen to my recordings, it's pretty obvious when compared to native English speakers.

Apart from the sounds, Ethan [2] was concerned about his fluency and was eager to improve. He stated: "I think the most important thing is your fluency". Gianna [3] also held the same opinion, noting:

Fluency is, I think, one of the most essential parts of English speaking. Before, in Chinese secondary schools or primary schools, we seldom taught students English speaking skills. Students usually didn't have a fluent English speaking ability, so they seldom had the opportunity to speak. And so, their fluency was impacted.

Besides English pronunciation, the inability to authentically use fully English vocabulary is one of the areas participants also felt insecure about. Lucy [9] thought that an English teacher should possess an extensive vocabulary. She expressed her insecurity about not having a large enough vocabulary compared with the ideal teacher she wanted to be. Kate [8], in addition, not only focused on the *quantity* but also the *authenticity* of her vocabulary and idiomatic expressions knowledge. Vivian [13] reported a similar opinion and pointed out the errors she has made in misusing vocabulary:

For example, the correct use of the article, words like "the" and as an NNEST, sometimes I may even make some mistakes in choosing the correct article to use, and sometimes the words that I choose may not be accurate enough, or native enough…

Other than these major aspects of English speaking, Isabella [4] also mentioned her concern with other aspects like intonation, as she said she frequently felt uncertain about the correctness and naturalness of her intonation in her speech. Insecurities about tone and stress were also shown by Camila [1], who described her tone and stress as "having some differences from a native speaker", and she would "try my best to practice and imitate the native speaker to practice". While showing concerns of linguistic capabilities, participants frequently positioned themselves linguistically inferior to NESTs, which is similarly illustrated in Yang and Fobes's (2025). Such self-doubt, apparent in the comparisons, between NNESTs and NESTs, reflects the underlying linguistic insecurity regarding their English proficiency, especially in their speaking skills.

On top of linguistic insecurities, participants also revealed strong feelings of insecurity about their professional identities. Professional identity, as defined by Caza and Creary (2016), refers to how individuals perceive their roles as professionals. While all the participants in this study identified themselves as language teachers, they also showed their struggles in constructing their

professional identities. These struggles include their ***insecurities about their teaching skills*** and their ***self-doubt about gaining students' trust.***

When asked about their level of confidence in their teaching skills, 11 out of 13 participants revealed uncertainties about their teaching skills. The qualitative results further indicated that participants questioned their professional identity as the teacher who teaches students. Some participants expressed their fear of teaching higher-caliber students and worried that these students might be more fluent than they are in the English language. For example, Lucy [9] reflected on her preparation for teaching and that she felt intimidated by the idea of teaching in a Hong Kong Band 1 school, which is a top-tier secondary school in Hong Kong. Jade [5] expressed similar concerns and related to her own previous experience:

> *I have been working with students from foreign countries, so I think some of their English levels are higher than mine. I need to work hard to be a Chinese teacher of English.*

Apart from students' high English proficiency, Gianna [3] expressed her insecurities about her teaching skills and her ability to differentiate students with various levels of English proficiency. As she noted:

> *To be specific, when dealing with students in the (same) classroom who have different English proficiency levels, I may think some students are more advanced and other students are less advantaged. And I think that is one issue that needs to be addressed.*

Vivian [13] also reported on her insecurities in using appropriate teaching skills to encourage student participation during the class. As she stated:

> *Some students may refuse to participate in the discussions or activities that we have arranged. So how should I communicate with this kind of student and encourage them to speak? It isn't easy to improve student motivation, but how should I encourage them in a very short class to speak up and participate? This problem is very challenging, and I need to think about it.*

These comments showed that the participants were frustrated by their inexperience in classroom management and might question their professional capabilities regarding teaching. Ethan [2] articulated this issue when he explained his insecurities about teaching skills in terms of classroom management:

> *I was concerned about an emergency that may happen in the real classroom. I may encounter some students with special needs. Some students are hard to handle, and I feel as though I cannot control the classroom. So that is the thing that I am very concerned about.*

In addition to teaching skills, insecurity around gaining students' trust can demonstrate participants' professional identity insecurity. Stella [12] believed one

of the challenges she faced was to make students believe that she was an excellent and professional teacher. She stated: "The first challenge is to make students believe you are an excellent professional". Similar to Stella [12], Josephine [6] also expressed her fear of losing students' trust:

> *Students will have a real speaking test in their college entrance examination. So, you not only need to teach them some grammar and vocabulary, how to read, but you also need to teach them how to speak. So if the teacher doesn't grab their ability to (teach) how to speak, students may not believe you. They think you are so low.*

This comment showed how the participants were worried about how students see them professionally. This further manifests the social and fluid nature of teacher identity highlighted by Yazan (2018), as teachers' identity is also influenced by the recognition of others, especially students. Moreover, such professional image is associated with language teachers' subject competence, consistent with Yazan (2018). Josephine [6] continued to bring up her insecurities about gaining students' trust, as she considered herself lacking the skill to teach English speaking. Being uncertain about making students believe in them, both Stella [12] and Josephine [6] are good examples of having self-doubt about their identities as professional teachers.

Vivian [13] further expressed her concerns about her own teaching identity. As she pointed out:

> *Some students are trying to ask questions that I cannot answer very clearly. This is another problem that I am going to face, like when students ask a question that I don't know how to respond to. How should I react to that kind of situation? And how should the way I react not cause students to lose confidence or trust in me? How should I react to avoid that kind of situation?*

Her great fear of losing students' trust due to her inappropriate responses to their questions also indicates the same insecurities that Stella [12] and Josephine [6], as well as many other participants, expressed. These fears show that the participants are not confident enough to establish their own professional identity as a teacher who has the students' trust.

Factors contributing to pre-service teachers' identities

These findings to the first research question illustrate participants' insecurity about their NNEST identity, which stemmed from their ***linguistic insecurity*** and ***professional identity insecurity***. The following session further answers the second research question, which explains the two major factors

contributing to their insecurities about their identities: ***adherence to native-speakerism*** and ***insufficient pre-service teacher training***.

First, the deep-rooted native-speakerism ideology among the participants affected their attitudes toward the English language and, hence, their teacher identity. After all the participants responded to their linguistic insecurity about their English-speaking skills, they were further asked to evaluate their English-speaking skills and foresee the challenges that might appear in their future teaching. When responding to these questions, participants always tended to compare themselves with NESTs, emphasizing the importance of being native or native-like. For instance, Isabella [4] explicitly spoke of her desire to sound like a native speaker:

> *I want to be more native-like in the next stage. I think this is primarily for speaking. I think I can provide more natural expressions or more correct and precise expressions for communicating in the English language. Currently, I think I still make many grammar mistakes during my speaking process that I don't even realize. So I have to sharpen my speaking skills; that's the most urgent thing I have to do.*

Participants tend to associate being native or native-like with being "correct", "perfect", and "professional", which indicated a clear exonormative tendency to their preference for English. When asked to evaluate their English-speaking skills, participants stated that they would like to "sound like a native English speaker" in all aspects like pronunciation, fluency, the use of vocabulary items, tones, etc. Even though most of them accepted their roles as NNESTs, they showed a preference for adopting an exonormative norm of English use, preferring the "standard" instead of their way of using English. For example, Kate [8] self-evaluated that she had a more "standard" pronunciation compared to her cohort, implying her assumption of viewing native English speakers' pronunciation as "standard" while NNESTs' pronunciation was "non-standard".

Josephine [6] 's response echoed Kate's [8]. While acknowledging their non-native accents, native-like pronunciation should be prioritized by emphasizing phonetics training. When prompted to share her thoughts on the importance of speaking like a native speaker as an NNEST, Josephine [6] stressed that it was "very, very important" to speak like a native speaker. It further indicated that, from the participant's point of view, being native is of utmost importance to their identity as an English teacher. Also, these pursuits of nativeness, especially in English-speaking skills, implied participants' underlying lack of acceptance in their English varieties. As a result, the participants tended to view their English proficiency as inferior to that of the native speakers, which could be one of the contributing factors to their linguistic insecurities.

In addition to the strong adherence to native-speakerism, insufficient pre-service teacher training might also contribute to professional identity insecurities.

Many participants expressed that they felt unprepared to teach in real classrooms even though they had studied language teaching and learning in their lectures. For example, Vivian [13] related her lack of confidence in teaching to the limited training she received:

> *I didn't learn much about it. For me, it was my first time learning about these teaching skills in class when I entered postgraduate studies. I think that the class is not systematic enough, and the teacher only taught us some very basic knowledge about education, about teaching language. However, I'm still not quite confident about the teaching skills that I have, so I still need to learn more and learn from practice.*

Another similar comment came from Kate [8], who argued that receiving training only from school education is not adequate for a language teacher. Her response to the inquiry about her teaching skills showed she had a strongly negative opinion about her teaching skills. She expressed that she felt insecure about performing like a "professional teacher" in front of the students because of her pre-service teacher education. As she stated:

> *I'm definitely not competent (as a teacher) because I don't have much experience. Even though I took 5002 and am going to take the teaching practicum course, I think my teaching skills are still pretty bad because I don't have much experience.*

Vivian's [13] and Kate's [8] comments suggest that the current pre-service teacher education does not prepare these teachers-to-be the necessary skills and confidence to excel in their future teaching. Both of them pointed out that academic knowledge about teaching seemed to be prioritized in their schoolwork. At the same time, there might not be enough opportunities for them to practice what they have learned in real classrooms.

DISCUSSION

This study provides insights into how pre-service teachers perceive their identities as NNESTs. It also contributes to understanding the construction of their identities. While all participants perceive themselves as NNESTs, their sense of insecurity was disclosed twofold through ***linguistic insecurity*** and ***professional identity insecurity***, which could be the result of their ***pursuit of native-speakerism*** and the ***insufficiency of their pre-service teacher training***.

With the firm belief that NNESTs' English proficiency is inferior to NESTs', pre-service teachers showed great insecurity about their English proficiency, especially in their English-speaking skills because of their pre-tertiary education background in mainland China, where reading and writing skills were of more focus. Feeling insecure about their language skills, participants tended to

doubt their "teacher identity" when facing the students, partially leading to further insecurity around forming their professional teacher identity. Such a mindset could drive them to improve their English proficiency to be as native-like as possible, thereby demonstrating an exonormative norm attitude about English—which aligns with much of the previous research focusing on NNESTs. For example, Chan (2017) discovered the tendency for Hong Kong's local English teachers to have exonormative attitudes, specifically toward British English, due to the historical colonial ties to Great Britain. In Hansen Edwards' (2017) study, he interviewed a hundred Chinese English speakers and found a preference for a similar exonormative norm among these speakers. Interestingly, both Chan (2017) and Hansen Edwards (2017) claimed that their data reflected *linguistic schizophrenia*, a phenomenon in which the speakers recognize their variety of English but, at the same time, judge their variety negatively. This perspective has been a consistent theme in our findings, where the participants say they were contented with their accent but at the same time say they wish they could be more native or native-like. For example, Josephine [6], who perceived her accents as non-native, stressed the importance of imitating native speakers:

> *The first (thing) is we should learn phonetics well, and I think it is more important that we imitate (natives); maybe we should imitate the words, the intonation, and the whole sentence is also important as well.*

This comment reflected the exonormative tendency of NNESTs, emphasizing sounding native without focusing on the necessity of being native for NNESTs. In Josephine's [6] response to whether she thought accents were important, Josephine [6] reported that both accent and being native-sounding are important for being NNESTs. However, her non-native pronunciation leads to insecurity when facing her students. This finding is consistent with Yoon's (2012) study, which suggested a conflict between a teacher's identity of being NNEST and their exonormative benchmark, revealing an intense anxiety about being a non-native English user.

Furthermore, the firm adherence to exonerative from all participants reflected NNESTs' perceptions of themselves as "outsiders" of English, showing their ***lack of ownership*** of the language. On the one hand, such a finding supports Yoo's (2014) research, which claimed that it is difficult for Chinese speakers of English to obtain ownership of English because China is one of the Expanding Circle countries where English is spoken as a foreign language without having official language status (Kachru, 1983). It is evident from the participants' reflections that mainland Chinese students lack the linguistic environment to communicate or write in English after their scheduled English classes, leading to a low chance of building ownership of English. Thus, these students tend to use the exonormative benchmark as the "perfect" reference. On the other hand, this finding also corresponds with Ahn's (2023), in which she researched the

relationship of language ownership to NNESTs, finding that the level of language ownership is positively correlated to language proficiency and self-identification as an expert. The fact that all the participants in this study labeled themselves as "learner" instead of "subject experts" in English echoes Ahn's (2023) finding on the lack of ownership of English.

The lack of ownership of English directly hints at the pursuit of ***native-speakerism***, as all participants in this study showed their eagerness to speak as native as possible. Yoon (2012) found that NNESTs felt insecure about their English pronunciation, accuracy, and interactions. In this study, participants suggested their linguistic insecurities, which were manifested from their insecurities towards their English pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary. When talking about improving English proficiency, several participants came up with the answer of "imitating" native speakers. This common mindset regarding exonormative norms as the "perfect" standard among the NNESTs is a frequent theme revealed by all participants in the study, which is one of the reasons for their strong insecurity in their teacher identities. These provide expanding evidence to NNESTs' pursuit of native-speakerism, significantly aligning with what the previous literature referred to as the "impostor syndrome" (Bernat, 2008). As described by Llurda (2005), NNESTs feel like *impostors* "in a world that still values native speakers as the norm providers and the natural choice in language teacher selection" (p. 2). Deng et al. (2023) observed that native-speakerism is not only limited to NNESTs' self-perceptions but has also long been mainstream in ELT, especially in mainland China, where native English speakers are always given greater preference. Kim (2011) investigated South Korean English teaching and concluded that native-speakerism negatively influenced the identity formation of English teachers, which included lower self-esteem in terms of using English to teach and a self-perceived bias towards their non-native status. Galloway's (2014) case studies revealed that, in expanding circle countries like Japan, some native English teachers got their jobs just because of their native accents, which potentially places a lot of pressure on NNESTs as well as strengthening the "superiority of native English-speaking norms" (p. 22). The deep-rooted concept of native-speakerism in the long history of ESL has made NNESTs insecure and, as Waters (2007) described, "has had a massive influence and exists to a greater or lesser degree in the thinking of all TESOL educators" (p. 281). Josephine [6]'s story reinforced this idea—she recalled her professor in her teacher training program commenting about her "not sounding like a native speaker". This experience shows that even the teacher educators themselves are passing on the native-speakerism ideology in the modern-day classroom.

The current study raises questions about teacher education, in which native-speakerism is still a significant factor impacting pre-service teachers' security, as well as the possible future action towards teacher education. As Deniz et al. (2022) revealed, native-speakerism remains the default framework in teacher

training programs worldwide. As a result, NNESTs often doubt their linguistic and pedagogical capabilities, leading to insecurities. Driven by such norms, NNESTs are always positioned as inferior to NESTs, impeding the formation of their professional teacher identity (Yang & Forbes, 2025). Given the importance of teacher identity in teacher education, which is considered a key to helping pre-service teachers build their advanced teaching skills (Pennington & Richard, 2016), this study stresses that identity-based teacher education moves beyond native-speakerism and acknowledges more English varieties. Deniz et al. (2022) discovered that pre-service NNESTs are willing to incorporate world English elements in their learning, which would help to increase the awareness of different varieties and improve the level of security. Chan (2024), following the discussion on Kachur (1998) and Hansen Edwards (2017), argued that the concept of native-speakerism should be redefined to better align with the current linguistic landscape in the world, where communication using English has been more frequent among non-native speakers. With a similar philosophy to incorporate world English elements, Chan (2023) proposed the WEMTT Framework in teacher education, in which the training of pre-service teachers' knowledge of language variations and attitudes should be a necessary part of building language awareness among these future teachers. By sufficient integration of the world's English elements, which acknowledges the legitimacy of different English varieties, this study seeks to modify current problems in language teacher training of pre-service NNESTs. The inclusion of world Englishes curricula in teacher training programs, as Al-Seghayer (2025) and Chan (2023) suggested, would promote a shift toward a more inclusive English teaching and learning environment in the realm of ELT, which will eventually benefit the future generations of English teachers.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

From a practical and theoretical point of view, the current study investigates the identity of mainland pre-service NNESTs and the factors that contribute to their identities. Intense insecurities in both their linguistic competencies and professional identities were revealed among the teachers-in-training. This study also discussed the underlying factors and reasons behind these insecurities, including the adherence to native-speakerism, lack of language ownership, and deficiencies in pre-service teacher training. Building a professional identity for pre-service teachers is essential, and now is the time to rethink how pre-service language teachers should be trained.

This study has some methodological limitations. Participant recruitment was convenient because all 13 pre-service teachers were from the same cohort of the pre-service English teacher program in Hong Kong. With the same training background, they might not represent all the NNESTs in Hong Kong or the pan-Asian regions. The imbalances in some of the variables, such as gender, previous

teaching experience, and age range, might also influence the representativeness of the current findings, especially on how the teachers reflected on the support they received from their institute. Though there was not a generalized picture of pre-service teacher identity, the findings here could offer insights into broader issues in teacher education and future teacher training, especially in Hong Kong. For future research, it would be suggested to include a wider group of NNESTs, potentially coming from teacher training programs across different universities in Hong Kong, to ensure the diversity and the representativeness of the results.

As the majority of the participants were from mainland China and received one year of teacher education in Hong Kong, this study is especially insightful for teacher education in Hong Kong under TTPS, which has opened up opportunities for mainland Chinese English teachers, who undertake or seek teaching positions in Hong Kong. However, the current result could potentially benefit also to regions with similar NNEST contexts, where multilingualism and world Englishes are promoted. The importance of NNESTs' identity in teacher training programs has raised in this age of globalisation when people are more willing to travel and work as global citizens.

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