

## GOING BEYOND *US* AND *THEM*: EXPLORING THE PRONOUN USE OF PROFESSIONALISING ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN EAST ASIA

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### Introduction

The English language continues to be of key strategic importance in East Asia (Hu & McKay 2012). Growing numbers of English language teachers – both local and expatriate – in East Asia are professionalising by taking higher level qualifications including MAs in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). For many higher education institutions, MAs in TESOL are important international programmes (Hasrati & Tavakoli 2015) and have been increasingly popular with language teachers since the 1990s, part of the broader trend towards professionalisation of the field (Burns & Richards 2009). Nevertheless, English language teacher professionalisation in East Asia, and English language teacher development more generally, remains under-researched (Copland et al. 2017; Trent 2012).

The aims of this study are to examine how, by analysing the pronoun choice in different stretches of talk about their studies and their work, professionalising English language teachers from East Asia instantiate relationships key to their teaching lives. In particular, we draw on small items that may often be overlooked in thematic analysis, but which have the potential to shed light on complex relationships. These items are the personal pronouns: *I*, *we* and *they*. It is worth noting that these interviews were held with researchers who were concurrently the participants' tutors on their MA programmes, so the professional allegiances expressed are in the context of this specific professional relationship. We thus align ourselves with other researchers interested in the discourse of teacher professionalism such as Walsh (e.g. 2013) and Garton & Richards (2008), who argue that it is imperative to understand teacher development as something that is 'instantiated through talk' (Ibid: xiii).

### Positioning the profession of English language teaching

Research into English language teacher education and development attests to the kinds of positions that are relevant to teachers, in and/or from East

Asia, who are professionalising in some way. These positions are complex, fluctuating and contested and many relate in some way to the native/non-native teacher dichotomy, which Aneja (2016: 572) characterises as 'dominant' in conceptualisations of teacher identity development. In East Asia, there is, for example, a growing body of literature which examines various aspects of this contested area. Here we present just three pertinent regional examples. Canh (2013), in a series of interviews with participants on a 'native-speaker' teacher scheme in Vietnam, finds the participants felt excluded from professional collaboration with the local teachers whom they worked alongside. Trent (2012), writing about a similar scheme in Hong Kong, finds that primary/secondary teachers from Australia, Canada and the UK had limited opportunities to position themselves as professional teachers. Ruecker & Ives (2014), who report on a critical discourse analysis of online job adverts in SE Asia, highlight the deprofessionalising effect of discriminatory recruitment practices, which restrict local teachers' opportunities and construct overseas teachers as little more than young enthusiastic backpackers.

Another orientation relevant to this study is that of Western and non-western positions and methodologies. For example, Ilieva (2010), finds that, in their portfolios of assessed work, teachers from China on a Masters course in Canada, who she identifies as non-native speakers without established professional identities, began to challenge the 'West is best' (p. 365) position that they were more accepting of on their arrival; here there is an implicit link to novice-expert positions. Lindsay, Evison, & Sedyńska-Abou Eid (In Review) interviewed teachers from China with limited professional experience attending a Masters in the UK about their experience of team-teaching refugees as part of an enhancement award. They found these teachers tended to align themselves with the refugees they were teaching (as being learners of English and UK life) and found themselves at odds with less experienced, but native-speaker, home students also teaching on the programme. This resonates with Farr &

Riordan (2015) who analysed the discourse of online communication during a one-year MA TESOL programme in Ireland, finding that, although the teachers' discourse showed a greater orientation to the profession as the course progressed, it reverted to a more novice orientation when they were under pressure from assessment.

What all these potential positions have in common is that they can be instantiated and contested in interaction, be that online, in the workplace, in the seminar room or in research interviews. When professionals from/in the same context talk, they may often signal in- and out-group membership although in-groups are often implicit (Vaughan 2007). One of the ways in which this can be achieved is through the analysis of pronouns. Of the research which has used this methodology, that of Farr & Riordan (2015) and Vaughan & Clancy (2013) has most resonance with the current study as they both consider personal pronoun use by teachers. In the former, the teachers were on an MA TESOL programme and in the latter, they were attending meetings in a language school in Mexico. Both studies illustrate how teachers' individual professional identities are expressed through the relationships and allegiances that are constructed through talk.

### Theoretical framework

Personal pronouns form part of a group of frequently occurring "deictics" or "indexicals" that point in some way (most typically in terms of person, place or time). For example, *I* and *we* are proximal person deictics or "near the speaker" rather than distal "away from the speaker". Thus, pronouns index something (a "referent") that is recoverable from the immediate text or context. Deictic theory, beginning with the work of Bühler (1934) and subsequently developed in seminal works by applied linguists such as Levinson (1983) has informed our understanding of the frequently-occurring items such as pronouns which encode deixis. In particular, pronoun choices are key indices of ideological and sociocultural positioning (Timmis 2015; Wales 1996) and feature heavily in identity work. As Vaughan & Clancy (2013: 65) observe, pronouns are 'concerned with the orientation to identity of participants in the communicative situation'. For us, the communicative situations are interviews with MA students carried out by their tutors who are also the researchers. In the current paper, we have chosen to focus on the interplay between three related personal pronouns: the first person singular *I* and plural *we*, and the third person plural

*they*. Choices made between the two related proximal (near the speaker) deictics *I* and *we* construct subtle differences in positioning in relation to the professional context especially as *we* is used to 'generate different communities of interest' (Wales 1996: 59) and often has vague referents (Vaughan & Clancy 2013) and because *they* can be associated with 'remoteness' from 'government' and 'bureaucracy' (Timmis 2015).

### Methodology

We characterise our approach as a discourse focused interview study, based on conversations with 16 teachers across three iterations of the same programme and sampled purposefully to achieve representativeness in terms of the nationalities of the teachers on each programme. We want to acknowledge that being interviewed by their academic tutors may have impacted on the accounts that the teachers gave about their professional identities and the significance of their postgraduate studies to their professional lives. However, the focus of the interviews was on opportunities for teacher development, rather than on professional identity or their NS-NNS teacher status; these were preoccupations common to the participants that emerged from the data.

The courses on which the teachers in this particular study were enrolled were three iterations of a UK-based global university's MA TESOL programme, one version taught face-to-face in the UK, one taught face-to-face at a campus in East Asia and one studied online but taught from the UK. In order to be eligible for the study, participants had to be enrolled students who were also living and teaching in East Asia, or, in the case of the UK-based students, who had been teaching in the region up until they took up a place on the full-time course. The teachers were working in/had recently worked in Malaysia, mainland China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam. All participants gave their informed consent and the research was carried out subject to institutional ethical guidelines. The interviews were semi-structured, and the participants were asked about various topics relating to their professional development. They were carried out either face-to-face on the campus where teaching took place, or via Skype. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

In addition to manually coding the data in order to identify macro-level themes (Bailey & Evison 2020) each researcher identified sequences in the transcript where shifts pronoun use were considered to be particularly salient. These sequences were characterised by the invoking or

contesting of professional position using particular combinations of *I-we-they* pronouns. We call these sequences *professional positioning episodes* (PPEs).

and suggested two distinct pronoun groupings that are shown in Table 1, which also includes key characteristics of each PPE and salient examples of the positions constructed.

**Key characteristics of professional positioning episodes**

The analysis identified the work of TESOL, the attributes of a TESOL teacher, and local and expatriate teacher issues as the three main themes

Position	Characteristics of the relationship	Examples
they-us	Behaviour or situation associated with 'they' implied to be negative in some way (changeable, unprincipled, privileged, thoughtless) Foregrounding of those in opposition to 'us' Lack of agency associated with 'us' Sense of shared worth of 'us' is implied 'They' not always clearly identified Some complaining (They are always doing...)	Government/authorities (they) Teachers who are impacted on negatively by the government decisions (us)  Secondary school teachers (they) Primary school teachers (us)  Peninsula Malaysia and organisations based there (they) Teachers in Eastern Malaysia (us)  Homeroom/local teachers (they) Expatriate teachers (us)
I/we-they	Can be more weight given to the centre (I/we) than the distal (they) Can be equal weight/tension between 'I/we' and 'they'. Othering of those in the 'they' position Sometimes 'I' segues into 'we' and vice versa	Private sector (I/we) Public sector (they)  Non-backpacker teachers (I/we) Backpacker teachers (they)  Forward-thinking/modern/informed teachers (I/we) Old-fashioned teachers/trainers (they)

Table 1: Types of professional positions

In the following section, we focus on three illustrative sets of positioning episode that we think will be of particular interest to language teacher educators as they indicate the kinds of alignment likely to be evident in the discourse of teachers in/from East Asia. In each case there are two categories of teachers who are positioned in the episodes: local and expatriate teachers, private and public sector teachers, forward and less forward-thinking teachers.

**Local and expatriate teachers**

Many countries in East Asia, including Malaysia, have implemented so-called “native speaker” programmes where the responsibilities for English language teaching are split, or shared, between local and expatriate staff, or where expatriate teachers mentor local ones. These kinds of programmes perpetuate the myth of native speakerism: 'an established belief that ‘native-speaker’ teachers represent a ‘western culture’ from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology' (Holliday 2005: 6). In the following

extract Nigel, a British teacher working in Japan, positions himself in relation to Japanese homeroom teachers:

Interviewer: OK, and can you me about something that the Japanese government is doing to encourage practising language teachers to do further study or get professional development?

Nigel: Well, the thing is that the foreign teachers I don't- that's not what they're really looking at at the moment we just happen to be there a lot teaching classes but they are mainly looking at, I think- their aim is that the home room teachers, I mean the main classroom teachers at the elementary schools should be erm quite firm like should be leading the English education even if they don't speak much English or anything like that but the actual homeroom teachers themselves aren't happy about that so erm they erm obv- leave a lot of it to us basically [laughs]

Interviewer: [laughs] So you've got this situation, do you do team teaching with the=

Nigel: Yeah we do yeah, we do, some teachers like to like team teach some teachers just like sitting in the corner and marking papers whilst we do it, I don't know about other people [...]

In the extract above, Nigel frames his position with the local teachers as a *they-us* relationship, but

he also locates this within a broader context of the local teachers being in a macro-level *they-us* relationship with the education authorities. This is similar to the relationship constructed by Mark, a British teacher who is studying online and is working as part of a mentoring scheme in Malaysia:

Interviewer: OK, great, thank you. Now I've got a few questions about Malaysia, where you're working now, can you tell me something about the government policies or targets regarding the learning and teaching of English?

Mark: Erm [laughs] OK, I mean I don't know specific government policies but I know that there is a strong drive in Malaysia at the moment to enhance the English skills from, you know, grass roots right down to the primary level all the way up to University level, and I know that the reason for this is because the Malaysian government feels that they have fallen behind in some way in terms of other countries in the region in the English skills and that they don't have enough graduates, graduating from University with high level English skills, um and so that's obviously kind of fed down into projects like [name of project] where the main emphasis is on literacy, where they're trying to improve the literacy levels of primary school students, that's why they've invited foreign mentors like myself to be involved now

In this extended response, although *they* appears to be an anaphoric referent pointing back to *the Malaysian government*, as Mark's turn continues, it becomes less and less clear who exactly *they* refers to; it can sometimes be difficult to establish whether *they* refers to a specific entity or is functioning as a pseudo-passive (i.e. the meaning of *they've invited foreign mentors like myself* may be closer to *foreign mentors like myself have been invited*). However, what is important is that Mark is, on the one hand, choosing to position himself with the teachers he is mentoring, but on the other is constructing a reasonably empowered *us* position as his involvement is by invitation. This dual positioning suggests a sensitivity to the ideological issues surrounding the appropriateness of western-run initiatives in the region (Bates, 2008).

### The private and the public sector in TESOL and the position of backpackers and non-backpacker teachers

The analysis revealed complex positioning in relation to the public and private sectors because *I-we-they* orientations allow teachers to construct multiple positions in a way that *they-us* orientations don't. The first of these relates to the private and the public sectors. In Japan, for example, teachers may be employed directly by schools or placed there by private companies, some teachers moving

between the two sectors or employed in both simultaneously. In the following extract Fiona, a British expatriate teacher with two years' experience who was doing her Masters in the UK at the time of the study, aligns strongly with the private sector in Japan where she taught.

Interviewer: Can you tell me something about the government policies or targets regarding the learning and teaching of English?

Fiona: English starts normally from secondary school and it's a grammar translation process whereas in the private sector it's task based learning so it's extremely difficult for students to go to private lessons and then go into the secondary schools and have a completely different method. And it's all geared towards passing the Eiken exam which is, like, a government exam and if you pass it then you can go to university. So we in the private sector try to start students on the Eiken exam from the age of eight

Here, we see a professional position in which the government is not constructed as influential yet remote, as with the Malaysian example included in Table 1, but discursively irrelevant. This is achieved through the choice of *English* as the grammatical subject of Fiona's response rather than *the government*. In fact, her positioning removes her from a hierarchical *they-us* relationship of government-employed teachers and strongly signals her location within the private sector. She introduces the sector and her own role in it in the same noun phrase *we in the private sector* which forms a complex subject for the clause and gives her considerable agency. She clearly demarcates a 'we-exclusive-of-addressee' position (Levinson 1983) and indicates a focus on sector rather than individual identity, invoking a group agency that does not include the addressee (Handford 2010).

The next salient *I/we-they* position is one that is orientated to by the expatriate teachers in the study: the "non-backpacker/backpacker position". Here an American teacher, Phoebe, is talking about her time in Korea.

Interviewer: Were you typical of that group of people [friends doing similar jobs], were you the same as them or were you different from them?

Phoebe: I would say that I was similar to the group of friends that I made there, just because, you know, that's why we were friends, we were similar

Interviewer: Yeah

Phoebe: We're similar, but overall I would say that we were very different from the majority of people that were teaching in- I mean the majority of foreigners you would meet because they were usually much younger, maybe 21 and they had just finished their bachelors degree, their

undergrad, and they were coming there as kind of a giant Spring break

Interviewer: [laughs]

Phoebe: So I think that, in that, that's sense where we're different because we're a little older, you know 26/27/28

Interviewer: So do you think that's why you were friends?

Phoebe: Yeah, I would say so

This positioning is a complex and sensitive one for expatriate teachers like Phoebe who are professionalising. In this extract she centres her own group by defining them by othering (Said 1994) *the majority of people* that were teaching in Korea. In the context of the interview, she constructs her own group's position as 'a kind of showing that is treated as normative or rule-governed' (Korobov 2010: 272), and the interviewer's laughter which follows is interpreted as alignment to this position by Phoebe who opens her next turn with the discourse marker *so* which indicates the sanctioned progression of her argument (Kyratzis & Ervin-Tripp 1999). Other formulations found elsewhere in the data are *I don't think it's really like as backpackery as it was* (Nigel about Japan) and *more like the backpacker types* (Doug, an American, working in Vietnam but talking about Thailand). Positions such as the non-backpacker/backpacker binary cannot be straightforwardly constructed as many professionalising teachers in East Asia are doing so having begun their careers as backpackers. Identity construction is known to be complex for the 'accidental teacher' (Yuan 2015) and 'second career teacher' (Trent & Gao 2009). For teachers who are in the process of professionalising through Masters study, these complexities are particularly pertinent because they are engaging in discourses of TESOL which value commitment and knowledge.

### Forward-thinking and less forward-thinking teachers

The importance of being located within a group of likeminded teachers facing challenging times is an important aspect of professional positioning. In the next extract, Ian, who is British and has been working on a "native speaker teacher" programme in Korea for five years brings to a close a very full response about the history of language teaching in Korea by talking about his immediate prospects:

Ian: [...] Again that's official government policy coming from the very top but how it manifests itself at the bottom is often a very different story. And that's it as far as I know. I do believe there's a lot of rumours about how they're trying to

phase out native English teachers and like in Seoul and what we call the Songi province which is something like the greater Seoul area they are phasing out a lot of native teachers (???)?. The general word, amongst the teaching community, is that, within three years, people in my role won't exist anymore which is one of the reasons I'm jumping ship.

Here, the relationship between the *they* and *we* positions is potentially difficult but Ian locates himself in a relatively secure position as a member of *the teaching community* for whom he has the right to speak, self-positioning this group through the formulaic *what we call the Songi province* which he then glosses for the interviewer. Thus, at a deictic level, he constructs a relatively powerful position which frames his individual decision to *jump ship* as an informed career choice not an abandonment. In fact, later in the interview Ian goes on to say he is taking on a more senior position as a teacher trainer in Korea.

In contrast to *they-us* PPEs that show a lack of agency in the discourse of government teachers in Malaysia, in *I/we-they* episodes, self-positioning can be more assertive as in this example. It comes from the end of the interview with Dara, a primary school teacher from the East of Malaysia.

Interviewer: OK thank you, thank you very much. Before we finish is there anything else you'd like to add or go back to?

Dara: Erm, I would just like to say that for the reason that I wanted to do this study was because I feel that you know in terms of professional level you know the teachers especially in Malaysia primary school teachers, we don't really have that much opportunity and um that's why I think one of the main reasons that I decide to do this programme but I realised it's quite a short-term solution to the problem because at the finish I don't really know what I'm going to do next but for primary school it's a bit of a disappointment because most of the courses that we went to are just they introduce a new curriculum but they don't really focus on things like pedagogy

Interviewer: Right

Dara: So yeah that's one of the things

Interviewer: So do you think it would be useful if you and other teachers like you who do a Masters programme could stay in touch when the programme finished?

Dara: Yeah I think that would be very useful because erm I mean at least we can talk to one another about what we are doing in schools, in our own teaching, and that would definitely help very much

Dara begins her question with a hesitation marker *erm* and the conventionalised expression of 'negative politeness' (Brown & Levinson 1987) *I would just like to say that* which indicates that she

perceives that her answer to the interviewer's question may cause some imposition. In fact, Dara takes up a position in opposition to the "interviewer-as-tutor" stating that she is disappointed that the next steps she needs to take in her context are unclear. She constructs a professional position in which she is both critical of the long-term impact of her studies and also of the favouring of innovation over pedagogy by the trainers in her context. The interviewer in turn constructs a response which positions Dara as a representative of a group of teachers who share a similar position, a position which Dara simultaneously sanctions and redefines as likely to promote talking rather than change.

### Discussion

The *they-us* category of PPEs is characterised by an oppositional relationship between the third person plural subject pronoun *they* and the first person plural object pronoun *us*. Understood from the point of view of transitivity – the interplay of the active and passive voice (Simpson 1993) – the disempowered 'us' is acted upon by the more powerful they.

The *I/we-they* positioning episodes have a different deictic landscape from the *they-us* PPEs. In *they-us* episodes, the teachers position themselves as *us* the receivers of whatever the often unspecified *they* commands or bestows upon them and the authority – often the government – is given more discursive weight. In the *I/we-they* episodes, teachers use the ambiguity of pronouns to construct groups to which they signal more or less alignment. These relationships are often multifaceted, and the exact nature of either group can be unspoken, assumed shared or simply alluded to. In this case, there is greater complexity and the use of *we* can be understood as 'homophoric' where identification of the referent 'depends on shared *cultural* context and presupposed shared knowledge' (Timmis 2015:117, original emphasis).

The *I/we-they* relationship indicates greater speaker agency than in *they-us* relationships, and more assumptions about the values which the teachers and their interviewers might share about the particular aspects of professional practice that are invoked. The various positions taken up, negotiated and contested are complex and are not simply reducible to a limited pattern of pronouns, and episodes identified as *they-us* or *I/we-they* do not contain *only* those pronouns, but these particular combinations appear to have a considerable reach or 'framing' function (Davies & Harré 1990) in the discourse as we can see from

the examples above. Whilst *they-us* positions can constitute lack of agency, there is a resonance between the more complex *I/we-they* positions and what Huberman (1992) calls the 'experimentation/reassessment' phase of a teacher's career cycle, which suggests a more nuanced professional positioning.

### Conclusion

By combining thematic and discourse analysis, and focusing on pronouns in particular, we have shown that at different points or PPEs in their interviews the teachers take up different discursive professional positions and these positions are both shaped by the unfolding discourse and constitutive of it (c.f. Korobov 2010). By drawing on Deictic Theory – specifically the episodic use of pronouns – this study has been able to contribute to our understanding of the intricacies of social interaction during interviews as well as to the professional position of teachers in East Asia more generally. As Hanks (1992: 48) puts it 'deixis links language to context in distinguishable ways, the better we understand it, the more we know about context'.

Teachers' professional positioning in social interaction during interviews with researchers who are also their tutors is predicated on the 'dialectical relationship between particular discursive practices and the specific fields of action... in which they are embedded' (Wodak & Reisigl 2001: 358). In the context of the interviews in this study, it is likely that certain talk is "legitimate" and certain talk isn't; the teachers we interviewed orientated towards a responsible professional position that they considered appropriate to our tutor roles and our stated research aim of exploring teacher development (c.f. Copland 2011).

Our findings thus suggest that teacher educators working on Masters programmes in TESOL should be mindful of discourse positioning in encounters with the teachers who are their students. As Vanassche & Kelchtermans (2014) observe, positioning is very powerful and 'continuous positioning' in particular ways can have long-term effects on teachers. We suggest that awareness of shifts in positioning is of critical importance, given that masters-level study is a key site of professionalisation which has the potential to impact on the remainder of the teachers' careers.

Likewise, teachers too can benefit from being aware of their discursive practices. If we consider this in relation to specific practical applications of the findings, one approach, both on Masters courses and as part of teacher development

activities in schools and colleges, could involve teachers recording and analysing together the pronoun use in their own professional conversations in the staffroom or in meetings. This resonates with the Self-Evaluation of Teacher Talk model (Walsh 2013) which scaffolds teachers' exploration of their discourse inside the classroom. We are not suggesting a reductive or prescriptive approach but posit that by actively reflecting with colleagues using *they-us* and *I/we-they* patterns as a starting point, teachers can (re)examine their discursive practices and consider how their professional discourse constructs and shapes their professionalism.

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