‘Two Voices, Many Languages’:

A Duoethnographic Look at Multilingual Identity in Teaching Spaces in a UK University

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Abstract

Despite the dominance of English and entrenched monolingual norms in UK higher education (HE), campuses are increasingly characterised by multilingual realities driven by intensified international mobility and internationalisation of HE. Many graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) and students come from multilingual backgrounds and routinely move across languages. While scholarly attention to multilingual identity in educational settings is growing, GTAs' experiences within this framework remain overlooked. To bridge the gap by answering calls to reimagine universities as multilingual spaces and to harness peer dialogue for GTA professional development, this study employs duoethnography to stage a critical conversation between two multilingual GTAs. Informed by Morea & Fisher's (2023) model of teachers' multilingual identities, we ask: How are our own and our students' evolving multilingual identities positioned in day-to-day teaching, and what affordances or constraints emerge within English-dominant pedagogical discourses? Through a reflective thematic analysis of our peer dialogue data, three key themes emerge: 1) managing our evolving relationship with 'Native Speakerism', 2) negotiating professional roles and personal identity through language use, 3) coping with emotional complexities of multilingual teaching. This study shows that multilingual identity is simultaneously a pedagogical asset and a site of struggle. By articulating these tensions, the study offers GTAs, GTA developers and programme leads practical leverage points for change, such as normalising translanguaging, fostering collaborative reflection on linguistic diversity, circulating language-inclusive teaching tips and foregrounding multilingual perspectives in departmental discussions, which may incrementally unsettle monolingual norms and cultivate more equitable, intellectually vibrant learning environments in UK HE.

Keywords: multilingual identity, graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), duoethnography

Introduction

The prevalence of multilingualism is far from a rarity but an increasing reality in today's HE institutions, following intensified globalisation and sustained internationalisation efforts (Blommaert, 2010; Wang et al., 2014). This trend is particularly evident in the context of UK HE, where multilingual students and staff represent a significant presence that actively contributes to the shaping of diverse linguistic ecologies (Preece & Marshall, 2020). Notably, international Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) constitute a distinctive yet integral group within the multilingual community, as they invariably occupy dual roles as students and teaching staff (Tavener-Smith et al., 2025), alongside an overlapping role as researchers (Bale & Anderson, 2024). From the 1990s onward, UK universities have relied on doctoral students in GTA role as a means of offsetting reduced staff-student ratios and maintaining teaching quality (Muzaka, 2009; Park & Ramos, 2002).

Despite growing multilingualism, English continues to hold a privileged position as both a global lingua franca and the dominant language of UK HE (Baker, 2011; Doiz et al., 2013; Seidlhofer, 2013). The dominance of English permeates almost every dimension of teaching, learning, and assessment practices in UK HE (Jenkins, 2013), which inevitably gives rise to the tension between emerging multilingual realities and entrenched monolingual norms. In view of the existing monolingual norms and underlying monolingual ideologies, current efforts to deconstruct them and promote multilingual inclusion in educational settings involve both a top-down approach (e.g., the European Union's promotion of plurilingualism) and a bottom-up approach (e.g., legitimising translanguaging practices in classrooms). Among the bottom-up approaches, an important initiative lies in empowering multilingual individuals through the affirmation and development of their multilingual identities.

While the research of multilingual identity has been progressing theoretically and empirically, the lived experiences and perspectives of GTAs remain insufficiently studied. The aim of this article, thus, is to explore how multilingual GTAs construct and negotiate their multilingual identities within teaching spaces in UK HE by capturing two GTAs' multilingual identities and tracking their development through peer dialogue, guided by Morea & Fisher's (2023) framework of teachers' multilingual identities. In the following section, a review on multilingual identity in terms of its theoretical groundings, characteristics, and formation is presented. This is followed by a brief account of duoethnography as the methodological framework, and its application for data collection. The subsequent section then reveals three tensions the GTA have encountered in expressing and enacting their multilingual identities. Finally, the article concludes by reflecting on the implications of the findings for supporting multilingual identity and informing pedagogical practice in HE.

Literature Review

Multilingual identity is an area of inquiry that has recently sparked growing interest in the sphere of education, against the backdrop of rising presence of

multilingual students, and a broader shift from deficit perspectives to viewing multilingualism as a resource. The existing body of literature reveals conceptual diversity in approaching multilingual identity, given the multiplicity of perspectives on both multilingualism and identity themselves, as well as the dynamic relationship between language and identity, which adds further layers of complexity. It is worth noting that in some cases the use of multilingual identity or its alternative terms can lack clear conceptualisations or may not necessarily engage with the subjective dimensions of identity as they intersect with multilingualism. To clarify, this article employs multilingual identity more as an analytical lens to explore experiences and self-perceptions surrounding being a multilingual speaker, rather than as an attempt to contribute theoretically to the construct.

Admittedly, research on multilingual identity is underpinned by a recognition of and a move away from the longstanding monolingual bias embedded in thinking and practice. Different strands of theoretical research have laid the groundwork for understanding multilingual identity as a distinct and valid construct, rather than as a set of parallel monolingual identities. For example, the line of research on multicompetence foregrounds the whole system of all languages in the mind of a second language (L2) user and the cognitive differences that set them apart from a monolingual native speaker (e.g., Cook, 1992, 2012, 2016). Multilingual individuals or L2 users are thus competent in their own right. It is invalid to measure them against the target of, or view them as imperfect versions of, monolingual native speakers (NSs). In the field of L2 motivation, in a similar vein, the notion of the deal multilingual self has been proposed to understand a multilingual's motivational system from an integrated perspective (Henry, 2017; Henry & Thorsen, 2018). This strand of research points to the possibility to move beyond an L2 identity to develop or envisage a more holistic multilingual identity.

However, being multilingual does not automatically translate into a multilingual identity. Empirical findings have testified to the socially constructed nature of multilingual identity and the constraining effect of the NS vs. non-native speaker (NNS) dichotomy on its development. It reveals that both teachers and students, especially those from monolingual English-as-a-Foreign-Language settings, frequently reported feelings of inferiority and insecurity, even when they demonstrated satisfactory English proficiency (Jenkins, 1998; Medgyes, 2001; Liao, 2017). They tended to orient themselves towards English NSs as models, with multilingual identity perceived as belonging exclusively to individuals from heritage or immigrant backgrounds. In light of this, Pavlenko's (2003) study demonstrated the possibility of helping English language teachers distance themselves from the traditional discourse of NNS and L2 learner and instead reimagine their identities as multilingual individuals and legitimate L2 users. In its context of TESOL[1] teacher education, it was through critical engagement with contemporary theories of bilingualism and multicompetence, along with topics such as linguistic diversity, native speakerism (Holliday, 2006), and language and identity, that an alternative identity option and imagined community of multicompetent, multilingual individuals was gradually opened up for the enrolled English language teachers. Moreover,

[1] TESOL stands for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. It is a certificate course designed both for people with little or no experience teaching English and for those who already have experience but require an internationally recognised initial teacher education qualification.

multilingual identity was recognised as an empowering identity option to the English language teachers in the sense of professional agency and legitimacy.

Pertinent to the constructed nature of multilingual identity, another noteworthy research endeavour mainly engages with a participative approach to multilingual identity formation (e.g., Fisher et al., 2020; Forbes et al., 2021; Gayton et al., 2025). Their work is grounded in the notion of multilingual identity as an umbrella identity that encompasses and transcends an individual's discrete language-specific identities, 'where one explicitly identifies as multilingual precisely because of an awareness of the linguistic repertoire one has' (Fisher et al., 2020, p.449). The formation of a multilingual identity, as Forbes et al. (2024) highlight, is typically not automatic. It involves deliberate and explicit construction through identity-based interventions in classrooms featuring a set of pedagogical and reflective practices. Although the starting point of fostering multilingual identity within this research framework is to empower students, increasing attention has been directed to supporting teachers' multilingual identity development. Specifically, Morea & Fisher (2023) conducted a study to investigate the role of an identity-oriented intervention in facilitating a group of pre-service teachers' multilingual identity development during their teacher education. The intervention was informed by the three dimensions of multilingual identity outlined by Forbes et al. (2021): experience (one's lifetime language exposure and perceived linguistic repertoire), emotion (the affective dimension closely related to one's language learning process and self-perception as a multilingual person) and evaluation (the cognitive dimension involving one's self-assessment as a speaker of languages). Building on their findings, they integrated two additional elements involving teacher conception of student multilingualism and teacher language practices in the classroom into the framework, thereby constituting a dedicated conceptual model for teachers' multilingual identities and extending the significance of multilingual identity development to the teaching spaces.

Perhaps not surprisingly, existing research on multilingual identity has predominantly focused on students with a gradual shift towards teachers, and there is limited attention to the multilingual experiences of GTAs. However, since GTAs occupy a dual identity as both students and teachers (Jazvac-Martek, 2009), this hybrid positionality can add complexity to their multilingual identity construction which further shapes their teaching practices, language use, and academic positionings. Accordingly, a more nuanced understanding of multilingual identity is needed, especially with respect to GTAs' situated experiences and perceptions.

Methodology

Informed by duoethnography, this study collected dialogic data from a peer dialogue between two senior GTAs (the first and second authors, namely, YL and KY) to collaboratively inquire into the construction and negotiation of multilingual identities in teaching spaces involving GTAs in the UK. Here, duoethnography is employed as a qualitative research methodology in which the two researchers collaboratively reflected on our lived experiences in a dialogic space, juxtaposing our individual life histories within pedagogical practice to develop new understandings of our multilingual identity formation and negotiation as HE teachers. This process is a critical step toward our development as critically engaged practitioners through

contrasting views and perspectives (Lawrence & Lowe, 2020). Both GTAs are native Chinese speakers who use English in professional and academic contexts. YL and KY studied Japanese as our second foreign language during our undergraduate studies. YL also has intermediate proficiency in listening, reading, and writing Korean, and can listen to and speak Cantonese at an intermediate level. YL migrated to the UK for study and work in 2019, and KY did so in 2021 for the same purposes.

To operationalise duoethnography, we set up an online meeting on Microsoft Teams for collaborative reflection as part of our professional development (Zhuo & Li, 2024). Informed by Morea & Fisher's (2023) model of teachers' multilingual identities, we co-designed a reflective protocol consisting of questions across five dimensions: experience, emotion, evaluation, conception of student multilingualism and language practices in the classroom. The dialogue was reciprocal: one person posed a question and the other responded by sharing her experiences, after which the first could either agree or disagree by illustrating her own. The dialogue was conducted in both Chinese and English. The dialogue lasted for two hours and was recorded and automatically transcribed by Microsoft Teams. We later listened to the recording multiple times to correct the transcripts for data coding and analysis. The transcript included an idiomatic English translation accompanying the original Chinese text.

Data analysis was guided by reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), which is particularly effective for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of shared meaning across qualitative datasets. This approach suited the study's aim of exploring how multilingual identities are constructed and negotiated in teaching space through dialogic reflection. Following Braun and Clarke's six phases, we first immersed ourselves in the data by listening repeatedly to the recording and reviewing the corrected transcript to gain an initial sense of recurring issues. Coding was then carried out manually, with descriptive labels assigned to segments relevant to the research focus. These codes were iteratively grouped into potential themes, and their coherence and relevance were critically reviewed. Themes were refined, defined, and named to capture both convergences and contrasts in the two GTAs' reflective accounts. Finally, three themes were identified, and the analysis was written with reference to the research inquiry. The following section presents an analysis of these themes.

Analysis and discussion

The RTA of the peer dialogue reveals three key aspects of how multilingual GTAs express our multilingual identities and navigate the tension between monolingual ideologies and multilingual identities in our pedagogical practices. These include managing our evolving relationship with 'Native Speakerism', juggling professional roles and personal identity through language use, and coping with emotional complexities of multilingual teaching.

Managing our evolving relationship with 'Native Speakerism'

Both researchers delineate a clear trajectory in our conversation: moving from being constrained by the divide between NSs and NNSs and the perceived power imbalance of being positioned as deficient NNS of English speakers, to dissolving the idealised image of the NS and embracing our multilingual identities. This shift highlights our evolving relationship with native speakerism, the ideology that positions the NS as the ultimate authority on the English language and its teaching. As Holliday (2006) notes, this belief can implicitly devalue the linguistic resources of multilingual speakers, such as the two authors, and often overlooks the strengths and complexities of migrant teachers' and students' multilingualism.

Extract 1

KY: '我的认知可能就是我心里还是有一个... native speaker 的一个 model，在那里的就是我觉得我当时的时候，其实我是觉得说我是想变成一个 native speaker 的... 就是我觉得他是有那个 power dynamics 在那里的... 然后你就突然觉得 native speaker 就是那种 power dynamics 突然就被消解掉了。'

('My perception was that I still had a native speaker model in my mind... I actually wanted to become a native speaker... I felt that it had that power dynamic there... But then you suddenly feel that the power dynamics of the native speaker are suddenly dissolved.')

The 'Native Speakerism' belief was once deeply ingrained in KY during her previous education, as reflected in her statement: '... I actually wanted to become a native speaker... I felt that it had that power dynamic there'. At the time, she aspired to become a native speaker, having regarded the native speaker as the model of a proficient English user. At the same time, she highlights the perceived inferiority of being an NNS in relation to an NS, feeling constrained by the NS-NNS dichotomy (Jenkins, 1998; Medgyes, 2001; Liao, 2017), which has contributed to the power imbalance between people with distinct linguistic repertoires of English. However, since moving to the UK in 2021 for study and work, her gradual immersion in English-speaking environments and the increasing opportunities for communication in English across all aspects of life have helped dissolve the power hierarchy she once perceived. Her description highlighted a positive shift from viewing NSs as superior in English communication to actively resisting the sense of inferiority imposed on NNSs by the NS-NNS divide.

Extract 2

YL: '我其实以前会很非常的审视，我自己讲的英文到底对不对... 就是用一种 right or wrong 的那种思维审视审视我自己讲的英文... 但是现在就是... 我已经习惯了，我就是个 second language learner，我也讲不到 native speaker 的那种感觉，但是我能表达我自己的想法就 OK，就这样。'

('I used to scrutinise myself very much, whether the English I speak is correct or not, using a 'right or wrong' mindset to scrutinise my spoken English... But now it's like... I've gotten used to it. I'm a second language learner, and I can't speak like a native speaker. But as long as I can express my ideas, it is okay. That's it.')

YL shares KY's concerns about scrutinising her own English use in terms of whether it was 'right or wrong' against the idealised NS model of proficiency. This

reflects a common pressure among multilingual educators to conform to an often unattainable and idealised standard of using English language (Holliday, 2013). Distinctively, after years of socialisation in English-speaking environments in the UK and with NSs there, YL began to validate her identity as an NNS of English and acknowledged that an NNS like herself could never fully attain the level of an NS. Her perspective on English has positively shifted from pursuing a native-like standard to recognising its functionality in expressing her own ideas in daily life, gradually acknowledging a multilingual trait in herself (Fisher et al., 2020).

Extract 3

YL: '我偶尔吧，我觉得我刚刚开始 teaching 和 teaching 的时候，我会把学生没有办法写好 English essay 这个事情和他们的 academic abilities 结合起来就是我会觉得说你连英文你都写不好，你学习也不怎么地吧，就是那种感觉就是就就会会有一种这样的感觉，但是后面，但是后面可能随着 AI 的的就是出现，然后大家都可以用来 polish English 之外之后了呢。我我我好，我好像反而不会这么觉得了，因为我也看不到那种语言特别混乱的 essay 了，现在我就会更，我就会越来越少的把学生的英语语言水平和他的学术能力的好高低联系在一起。'

('Occasionally, I think when I just started teaching and teaching, I would connect the fact that students couldn't write good English essays with their academic abilities, just I would feel like, if you can't even write English well, your studying is probably not that good either, that kind of feeling, just just would have this kind of feeling. But later, but later maybe with the emergence of AI, and after everyone can use it to polish English, I, I, I seem like instead don't feel that way anymore, because I also don't see those kinds of especially messy-language essays anymore. Now I would more, I would more and more rarely connect students' English language level with the level of their academic ability.')

Moreover, the ideology of 'native speakerism' has not only influenced how multilingual educators view themselves but has also affected how we perceive and interact with our students who are L2 users, such as the NNS students in YL's narrative. YL tended to associate students' perceived deficiencies in English use within academic contexts with our overall academic abilities, reflecting a negative attitude toward NNS students' performance. However, this perception has been moderated by the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), which can assist in correcting grammar issues (Jiang, 2025), as she rarely encountered poorly written essays when students could rely on AI for language refinement.

Comparatively, both researchers illustrate a positive trajectory from viewing the 'native speaker' as a model of authority to challenging and ultimately dissolving this ideal. Our relationship with the concept and ideology associated with the label of NS has evolved from feeling constrained by the perceived power and perfection of NSs to embracing both our own and our students' identities as NNSs, thereby validating what we once viewed as deficiencies while adapting to an English-speaking environment. Additionally, the advent of AI has contributed to this shift by assisting in the correction of language issues. This transformation, from aspiring to linguistic perfection to recognising the value of our teaching expertise, viewing English as a functional lingua franca, and acknowledging our own and our students'

multilingualism, reflects critical rejection of the ideology of 'native speakerism' as we navigate and socialise within UK academic life.

Negotiating professional roles and personal identity through language use

The link between specific language use and identity in various contexts recurs throughout both researchers' narratives in the dialogue. The interconnection between conscious language choice and the construction and expression of professional and personal identities is particularly salient, as English in the context of a UK university functions not only as a medium of instruction but also as a means of self-representation of professionalism within the university setting (Dafouz, 2018) while teaching students from multiple ethnic backgrounds. The choice to use or not use English in formal or private teaching spaces signifies professional legitimacy while also delineating the active differentiation between one's professional self and personal life.

Extract 4

YL: '因为我觉得在这种环境让你用英文去工作，去教书的一个环境，你突然跟你的学生讲中文，我觉得是一种不专业的想法，不专业的表现... 我觉得英语对我来说就是就是 professionalism 就在这个环境里面。'

('Because I feel that in this kind of environment that lets you use English to work, to teach, if you suddenly speak Chinese to your students, I feel it's a kind of unprofessional thinking, unprofessional behaviour... I feel that English, to me, is just just professionalism in this environment.')

Extract 5

YL: '使用这个语言的场景有关，因为我们刚刚其实有谈到很多不同的场景吧，比如说在 supervision 里面在课堂在下课了之后，以及比如说在其他场景下面，其他场景包括 digital platform，比如说微信啊，teams 啊, bump into students 的时候，我们会不会就是在不同的场景下面对使用中文？有不一样的 perception，就比如说你要我在上课的时候用中文，我绝对 100 percent，我就是抗拒，但是你如果你下来问我问题，你想跟我说中文，那我是完全 OK 的，你在 supervision 里面，你跟我一对一的时候，你想跟我说中文那 OK 没问题，因为只有我们两个人在，但是如果呃，你在 teams 上面给我发中文，学生跟我发中文，我也很抗拒这个事情。'

('It's related to the context of using this language, because just now we actually talked about many different contexts, right, for example in supervision, in class, after class, and for example in other contexts, other contexts including digital platforms, like WeChat, Teams. When bumping into students, would we, just in different contexts, have different perceptions about using Chinese? Like for example, if you want me to use Chinese during class, I am absolutely 100 percent, I just resist. But if after class you come to ask me a question, you want to speak Chinese to me, then I'm totally OK with that. If in supervision, when it's one-on-one between us, you want to speak Chinese to me, then OK no problem, because it's just the two of us. But if, uh, you send me Chinese on Teams, students send me Chinese, I also really resist this thing.')

In YL's reflection, she associates the use of Chinese in an English-medium instructional environment with unprofessionalism, while positioning the use of English as a marker of professionalism. She captures this explicitly in her response: 'I feel that English, to me, is just professionalism in this environment', thereby linking the representation of her professional self to her language choice in teaching. Furthermore, she delineates clear boundaries between different communicative spaces, mobilising distinct linguistic resources in accordance with specific spatiotemporal contexts. In her account, formal teaching settings, such as the classroom or official digital platforms like Microsoft Teams, are construed as English-only zones tied to her professional role. This reflects an understanding of professional identity position as not only spatially situated but also linguistically constituted (Li, 2023; Naz & Beighton, 2024). It also resonates with the notion of transpositioning, which highlights how identities are continuously negotiated and reshaped through language practices across different spaces and contexts (Li & Lee, 2024). Additionally, in more private, one-on-one settings like a supervision meeting, the use of Mandarin becomes acceptable and is even seen as a resource. Nonetheless, she still reveals a sense of resistance stemming from the concern that, during dissertation supervision with Chinese students, using their shared first language (L1) might be perceived as unprofessional due to the potentially heightened rapport it could create by highlighting shared linguistic backgrounds and personal ethnic identities.

Extract 6

KY: '我也会考虑到，就是... 我会不会我说中文会，或是就是 reveal，这方面的 identity 会显得自己不够专业。'

('I also will consider, just... whether if I speak Chinese, or like reveal, this aspect of identity will make myself appear not professional enough.')

KY shares YL's concern about being perceived as 'not professional enough' when using Chinese in teaching spaces, further underscoring the interconnection between self-representation, professional practice, and language choice for multilingual teachers (Morea & Fisher, 2023).

Across both accounts, a clear tension emerges: the use of Mandarin is constructed as simultaneously 'unprofessional' and as a potential threat to teaching authority, thereby reinforcing a divide between public English-only professionalism and the private, pragmatic use of Mandarin for clarity. This belief in a negative correlation between first-language use and professional performance results in a highly

contextual, spatialised, and deliberate management of our linguistic repertoires. Such navigation illustrates that professionalism is not a fixed state but rather a performance of linguistic competence, one in which language choice plays a crucial role in establishing teaching authority, signaling expertise, and maintaining boundaries between multilingual tutors and our students.

Coping with emotional complexities of multilingual teaching

Across the narratives of KY and YL, the emotional landscape of being a multilingual teacher is marked by a persistent sense of imposter syndrome which 'conveys not only an inability to recognise one's own success and internalise esteem indicators but a conviction of fraudulence and inauthenticity' (Breeze, 2018, p.194), and a complex mix of conflicting emotions, closely tied to our use of language. This experience extends beyond mere performance anxiety, encompassing the emotional burden of teaching outside the perceived 'native speaker' norm. While being recruited to teach in English and succeeding in doing so brought a sense of pride, feelings of inadequacy regarding linguistic competence often triggered a duality of emotions. This tension, between pride and anxiety, competence and self-doubt, emerges as a defining feature of our professional experience.

Extract 7

YL: '我感觉我 imposter syndrome 不是因为我，我觉得我，我觉得我不够资格教，而是可能有一点语言方面的东西就是... 可能就是自己作为一个中国人...然后我要用我要用英文去跟他们讲，我可能会偶尔会觉得说啊，他们会不会审视我自己的英文什么的。'

('I feel my imposter syndrome is not because I, I feel I, I feel I'm not qualified to teach, but rather maybe a bit of language aspect stuff, just... maybe just myself as a Chinese... and then I have to use, I have to use English to speak to them, I may occasionally feel like, ah, will they scrutinise my English or something.')

Extract 8

KY: '会有就是我会觉得有一点我自己是个草台班子的那种感觉在... 我也不知道，但我确实觉得我当时去上课的时候，我确实就是有一种 imposter syndrome 在。'

('There is... I feel a bit like I'm of a makeshift team... I don't know, but I did feel that when I went to teach a class, I did have a kind of imposter syndrome.')

YL clarifies that her imposter syndrome does not arise from a deficiency in subject knowledge, but from the 'language aspect', specifically, her use of English to deliver instructions. In spite of her pride in being able to teach, this linguistic concern amplifies her anxiety, generating a persistent fear of scrutiny by students when teaching in an L2 as a Chinese educator, which in turn erodes her confidence and intensifies self-doubt. Beyond the immediate classroom experience, this tension reveals a deeper paradox: as an L2 user, she is expected to teach through a language that is not her first, while simultaneously negotiating her L1 identity, which is intimately tied to her ethnic and cultural self-conception. KY echoes this sentiment,

describing the experience as being part of a ‘makeshift team’, a sarcastic yet poignant metaphor that captures the structural marginalisation and perceived lack of legitimacy experienced by multilingual GTAs, a group of student teachers positioned in the liminal space between fully established staff and students within institutional hierarchies (Bale & Anderson, 2024; Collins, 2021), which further diminishes her sense of qualification to teach. This ‘in-between’ positionality (Tavener-Smith et al., 2025), combined with the multilingual realities of GTAs, adds an additional layer of complexity to the negotiation of professional identity in the teaching space, as we navigate both our non-native language proficiency and our pedagogical authority. Collectively, these reflections illuminate the intricate interplay between language, identity, and power, highlighting how institutional instructional norms privileging ‘native speaker’ authority shape the emotional and professional realities of multilingual teachers whose L1 is not English.

The narratives of these two researchers further reveal complex emotional landscapes, encompassing both pride and imposter syndrome. This duality has enabled them to cultivate a participative multilingual identity (Gayton et al., 2025), through which we actively engage with our emotional sensitivity in practice and diversify our teaching beyond English-only templates.

Implications and conclusion

This duoethnographic study illuminates the teaching and living experiences of multilingual GTAs in a UK HE context. By staging a critical conversation between two multilingual GTAs, our findings reveal that multilingual identity is simultaneously a profound pedagogical asset and a significant site of struggle. The tensions explored, between embracing our identities and navigating Native Speakerism, between using language for professionalism and for personal connection, and between pride and imposter syndrome, are not merely individual psychological issues. Rather, they are reflections of a broader institutional environment that, despite its multilingual reality, remains shaped by entrenched monolingual norms. We hope that the implications of these findings extend to three key groups: multilingual GTAs themselves, the developers and supervisors who train them, and the institutional leaders who shape policy regarding supporting this group of student teachers.

For multilingual GTAs, this study validates their experiences of linguistic insecurity and imposter syndrome as a systemic issue rather than a personal failing. Our findings suggest that the emotional burden of teaching in a L2 is a core part of the professional experience for GTAs. Recognising this tension is a critical first step toward self-advocacy and building resilience. By collectively articulating these struggles, GTAs can move from feeling isolated and ‘unbecoming’ to becoming part of a community that recognises the shared value of their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Guo & Sidhu, 2024). Our duoethnographic process models how collaborative reflection can be a powerful tool for this purpose, transforming what were once private anxieties into a basis for collective strength and professional growth. This shift enables GTAs to critically assess and ultimately reject the monolingual ideologies that constrain them, thereby cultivating a more authentic and powerful professional identity.

For those responsible for GTA professional development and academic programmes, our study offers leverage points for fostering a more inclusive and equitable teaching environment. The findings highlight the need to move beyond standard pedagogical training to address the affective and identity-related dimensions of multilingual teaching, propelling an identity-based intervention in GTA development (Forbes et al., 2024). We recommend incorporating targeted professional development workshops that focus on the emotional aspects of language use in the teaching space. These workshops could offer a safe space for GTAs to discuss their experiences with imposter syndrome and to collaboratively develop strategies for leveraging their multilingualism as a teaching asset (Lu et al., 2025). Instead of framing multilingualism as a potential barrier, training programmes should normalise it as a natural and valuable part of the pedagogical landscape. This could involve circulating language-inclusive teaching tips that encourage linguistic diversity, celebrating the diverse linguistic repertoires present in the classroom, and creating opportunities for GTAs to share their unique cultural and linguistic insights with peers.

At the institutional level, our findings hint at the foundational monolingual assumptions that often underpin UK HE. The institutional expectation that English is the sole legitimate medium of instruction and professional communication creates a barrier to recognising and harnessing the intellectual and cultural richness that multilingualism brings. Programme leads and department heads can lead change by actively foregrounding multilingual perspectives in departmental discussions and policymaking. This means actively soliciting input from multilingual staff and students on the linguistic issues related to curriculum design, assessment, and communication practices, thereby acknowledging their participative agency in driving constructive changes to pedagogical practices in multilingual universities (Gayton et al., 2025) and contributing to the broader project of decolonising English in HE (Baker et al., 2025). It also involves critically examining and updating policies to acknowledge and support the use of languages other than English where it enhances learning and communication. By incrementally unsettling these monolingual norms, universities can cultivate more equitable, intellectually vibrant learning environments.

In conclusion, our study confirms that multilingual identity in the UK HE context is a complex interplay of struggle and asset. It is a site where GTAs navigate institutional expectations, professional standards and personal realities, often leading to emotional and professional tension. However, by articulating these tensions, we reveal a clear path forward. The key to cultivating more equitable teaching and learning environments lies not in assimilation to monolingual norms, but in the active, systematic validation of multilingualism as a core part of pedagogical excellence. The journey of moving from a position of perceived deficiency to one of genuine professional confidence is a testament to the resilience of multilingual teachers. This study demonstrates that by embracing collaborative reflection and fostering an institutional culture that values linguistic diversity, we can create an academic space in which multilingual identity is recognised as a valuable and powerful resource.

Ethical claim: This study only used the data involving the two authors and received the full consent from the two authors in using the data. There is no conflict of interests.

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