

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH PAPER: 'I'm still not sounds like native speaker': The native speaker norm, language ideology, and the empowerment of international students

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International students in the United States are a large and growing population (Institute of International Education, 2010). Universities in the United States and elsewhere are attempting to tap into the potential benefits of international education including the advantages that a culturally and racially diverse student body offers. Despite valuing international students for their cultural diversity, universities still seem reluctant to embrace the linguistic diversity that international students who are 'non-native speakers' of English inevitably bring with them (cf. Jenkins, 2011). This study explores this issue from the point of view of eight international students studying at a mid-sized US university, using questionnaire and interview data collected longitudinally over eight months. The data reveals that despite many claims to the contrary (e.g. Carter, 1998; Kubota, 2006; Kuo, 2006; Prodromou, 2006; Scheuer, 2005; Sobkowiak, 2005), international students are not unequivocally in support of using a standard based on native speaker norms for language learning and use. Rather, the issue is a source of

conflict and contradiction for the students. Furthermore, this ideology of 'nativeness' formed on the basis of the belief that 'native speaker' language represents 'authentic' or 'superior' language leads the participants to a position of devaluing their own and other 'non-native speakers' intelligibility and communicative capacity. The study concludes with the suggestion that the ideology that holds that 'non-native speaker' language is deficient as opposed to different from 'native speaker' language is incompatible with a vision of egalitarian international education, in which English is used as a common language or lingua franca. In order to empower international students to contribute to the academic discourses that characterize US higher education (and other contexts), recognition of the legitimate speakerhood of 'non-native speakers' of English is critical.