



## Can Monolingual Language Teachers Be Effective?

by [Kathryn Accurso](#) & [Brenda Muzeta](#)

*Can I be an effective language teacher if I'm monolingual?* This question came up recently in a course full of preservice English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) teachers. Once asked, it became clear that the question had been lurking on a number of people's minds. Some nervously expressed that they had felt afraid or too guilty about their own monolingualism to pose the question sooner, especially in front of multilingual peers.

In this article, we suggest this is a critical question for all members of the TESOL community to consider, whether they identify as monolingual or multilingual. However, we argue that this is not just one question, but a line of questioning that begins with what we mean by *monolingual*.

### Exploring Monolingualism

From a sociocultural perspective, monolingualism is an ideology, even more so than it is a practice (de Jong, 2013). In the following sections, we elaborate on what that means.

#### Language Varieties

Every person has multiple language varieties in their repertoire, as many language varieties as the social contexts they've encountered in their life so far. People who think of themselves as monolingual draw from different varieties in different situations, just as multilingual people do. For example, one elementary teacher candidate who identified as monolingual elaborated:

I took 3 years of Spanish classes in undergrad and used to practice it a lot when traveling, but I consider myself to be monolingual because I don't use Spanish every day now. But I guess I don't use academic English every day either. When I'm at home with my dog, Roscoe, I use a sort of "talking to puppies" English. And what I guess I would call a more "casual privileged" English with my college friends. But that kind of casual is pretty different from the way I talk with my grandma or even my parents even in casual settings.

Similarly, a secondary teacher candidate expressed:

I too do not know of any other language outside of English besides taking Spanish classes all throughout high school. As someone who is monolingual, it can be scary to walk into a classroom that is over half English learners...I speak enough Spanish to communicate with students and parent(s) and/or guardian(s) but not teach content.

Counter to what the label “monolingual” implies, these teacher candidates list multiple languages and language varieties they have in their meaning-making repertoires. They also observe some of the different situations in which they draw on these different resources. Despite identifying as monolingual, they do not describe a mind that holds only a single language, or a mouth that uses only one language variety. In real life, people accumulate many kinds of meaning-making resources throughout their lives, and they use them flexibly to meet the needs of whatever situations they find themselves in—which leads to the first dimension of this issue: In practice, how monolingual are you?<sup>1</sup>

### **Monolingual Ideologies**

Monolingual ideology, on the other hand, is a *belief* about language use, as opposed to the language use itself. Monolingual ideology is what allows one language, like so-called academic English, to become idealized as “standard” even though we know people’s actual everyday language practices involve multiple languages/varieties. Some of the ideas that underlie a monolingual ideology are that

- monolingualism is the norm in any given society,
- language standardization is needed for effective communication, and
- assimilation to the standard language practices of a group is what allows a person to successfully join that group.

From this perspective, language diversity is a threat to ideals of efficiency and oneness.

In an ESOL classroom, monolingual ideologies might show up in teaching practices that focus centrally on English with a lack of substantive attention to students’ home or community languages. These ideologies may also surface in teacher comments about the need for students to share a common language with reference only to English. Other examples include teacher comments about students needing academic English for social mobility, with no attention to the ways other languages/varieties afford people access to jobs.

### **Plural Language Ideologies**

In contrast, plural language ideologies reflect a belief that language variation, mixing, and hybridity are the norm for all language users. Diversity is seen as the norm, not a problem to be overcome. From this perspective, no language variety is inherently more logical or valuable than

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<sup>1</sup> We recognize that this is an extremely simplified account of languaging, and we don’t mean to imply that there is no difference between meaning-making repertoires with many official languages in them, and repertoires who have only grown to include varieties of a single named language. We mainly mean to question and complicate readers’ understanding of what is meant by *monolingual*.

another. Instead, “standard English” and “success” are seen as social constructs that are intertwined with nonlinguistic structures like power, racism, and colonization.

In the ESOL classroom, plural language ideologies might show up in moments where teachers support students to make academic meanings using a variety of resources from their meaning-making repertoires, thereby disrupting the privileging of “standard” language use in school settings. Plural language ideologies might also be reflected in assignments that value and affirm the variety in students’ language practices, such as identity texts (Cummins, Hu, Markus, & Montero, 2015), or in comments to colleagues and students that position language variety as a norm rather than a deficit (Accurso, Lopez Rodriguez, & Lopez, 2019).

Some teachers find themselves in between monolingual and plural language ideologies. They believe bilingualism is beneficial, but that adding academic English is what will lead students to success in the dominating culture. They may see this as a pragmatic stance to take in contexts where English is the official language, whether this is an explicit or simply de facto policy.

## **Mono- and Plural Language Ideologies in Practice**

Importantly, these language ideologies do *not* necessarily correspond with the way a teacher identifies, and they are not fixed. Monolingual ideologies are something that anyone, whether they identify as monolingual or multilingual, can have and display and teach from at any given time, even if they generally ascribe to more plural language ideologies. For some language teachers, this can be difficult to comprehend, a “mind warp” as one teacher candidate put it. “You mean I can be ‘monolingual’ but not have monolingual beliefs?! And sometimes I might be teaching in ways that show monolingual beliefs even if I really believe different languages are all valuable?” Yes, which leads to a second dimension of this issue: To what extent have monolingual beliefs influenced you as a teacher?

Matthew, a secondary teacher candidate, observed:

Most American public school teachers probably do not know what it is like to be in a situation in which they are unable to communicate with their classmates or teachers. That means I need to work harder to relate to my students, differentiate their education, and create an inclusive, open-minded learning environment.

In this quote, Matthew also points to a third dimension of this issue: pedagogy. In other words, how “monolingual” a teacher’s approach to language teaching is. Readers, how do you involve different varieties of language in your classroom? What beliefs about language do you act out when you create and describe assignments? What about when you model “exemplary” language for a particular content area? When you react to students’ language use?

## **Developing Plural Language Ideologies and Practices**

Research has shown that monolingual ideologies can hamper good teaching, and cause academic, emotional, social, and economic harm for ESOL students (e.g., de los Rios & Seltzer, 2017). Therefore, we advocate for a move away from “monolingual” understandings of people and

pedagogy. Instead, our suggestion is that as a TESOL community we each develop a more nuanced view of our language practices and varieties and reflect on our language ideologies and the ways we see different ones showing themselves in our teaching and in the broader society.

To that end, we conclude with a Language Ideology Guide for Reflection and Action (Appendix; pdf). Readers (whether preservice teachers, in-service teachers, or teacher educators) can use the guide to notice different language ideologies at play in their lives inside and outside of school. In addition, the guide provides practical, actionable suggestions for moving toward more plural language ideologies and teaching practices. Over time, we hope this guide will support readers in moving away from perceptions of linguistic inadequacy—their own or their students’—because as language and literacy scholars Paris and Alim (2017, p. 6) remind us, “the future is a multilingual one.”

## References

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## Language Ideology Guide for Reflection and Action

### Reflection

**My Language Use:** What language(s) and/or language varieties do I use regularly at work and outside of work? Try naming the varieties and the contexts in which you use them.

**My Language Beliefs:** What are my beliefs about language use and variety? To what extent have monolingual ideologies influenced me, first as a student and now as a teacher?

**My Language Teaching Practices:** How “monolingual” is my approach to language teaching?

- How do I involve different languages/varieties of language in my classroom?
- What beliefs about language do I act out when I create and describe assignments?
- What beliefs about language do I act out when I model “exemplary” language in the content areas?
- How do I react to students’ language use? What beliefs about language do my words and actions reflect?

### Action: How can I embody more plural language ideologies in my thinking and teaching?

#### Instead of...

Characterizing students mainly by their English proficiency level

Requiring all classroom talk and writing be in English

Explaining “academic language” to students as something that just is the way it is

For example:

*We don't say 'I think' in science. It's just not the way it's done.*

*Essays always have a thesis up front.*

Accepting the privileged status of English in school and society

#### Spend time consciously...

→ Paying attention to students’ home language(s). Ask yourself: Do I know what they are? How? Am I making any assumptions?  
→ Relating to students, noticing their cultural and linguistic differences, and routinely valuing them out loud

→ Noticing signs that multilingual students feel worried they will lose their language(s) as they move forward in your class  
→ Finding ways to create a classroom ecology that takes “losing a language” off the table

→ Inquiring critically and systematically about how different texts work and whose perspectives they represent

For example:

*Why did the author choose these words/images?*

*What meanings are ascribed to them?*

*How do they differ from uses of these choices elsewhere?*

*What do they achieve by the way they are used, contributing to whose loss and to whose benefit?*

→ Imagining what classrooms could look and sound like if other languages were valued as much as English

→ Exploring how the status of standard English intersects with other forms of privilege (e.g., Whiteness, social class)