Different Paths, Different Englishes: Comparing my experience as an International Student with an ESOL Learner

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1.Rationale & Introduction

This account compares my experience with that of a student named Layla (pseudonym) in my placement at English for Action (EFA), a London-based charity that provides "participatory" ESOL courses. I worked as a volunteer teaching assistant in the ESOL class, and I therefore positioned myself as both a researcher and a participant. In my experience, the ESOL class provided space for students to discuss how they use language resources in their daily lives (Cooke et al., 2019, p. 146). It was during the class, when the teacher prepared questions on small pieces of paper for us to ask each other, that I had the opportunity to have a one-to-one conversation with Layla.

I mainly adopted ethnographic interviewing and auto-ethnographic approaches in this study. Our interview was conducted via video call, as we lived far from each other and were too busy to meet in person. Although the conversation was mainly led by my questions, they were not rigid and often evolved in response to her answers, making the interview semi-structured. In this process, I was not only collecting factual information,

but also exploring the feelings behind these experiences. As this was a comparative study, I was also a subject within the research; auto-ethnography allows researchers to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273). However, these approaches also presented limitations, such as the risk of misreading nuances in Layla's responses given her limited English proficiency, and the inevitable influence of my own subject position on the interpretation.

To understand our different backgrounds, it is important to outline our positions. I was a 23-year-old student from China, with a continuous and institutionally supported educational trajectory, and I spoke Chinese, English and Korean, having completed my undergraduate studies in Korean. In contrast, Layla, a 28-year-old from Somalia who grew up in Dubai, had travelled through seven countries before arriving in the UK due to visa-related issues. She had previously studied Science at undergraduate level and hoped to pursue a degree in Law in the future. At the time of the interview, she was studying English in the UK in order to improve her language proficiency and better prepare for her future legal career, while balancing a part-time job.

Although both of us were learning English in the UK, language learning held very different meanings for us. During our conversation, I identified both similarities and significant differences, which provided a strong foundation for this comparative account. This paper will analyse the relationship between mobility, institutional recognition, and language anxiety through four comparative dimensions: mobility and securitisation , recognition and erasure of past capital, linguistic citizenship versus standard language ideology, and social networks and engagement.

Finally, as this was an ethnographic account in which I acted as both researcher and participant, I acknowledged that my position as a student at King's College London might introduce certain biases into my analysis (Lichterman, 2017, p. 36). My interpretation of Layla's experience was based on "how I figured out other people's meanings in the field" (Lichterman, 2017, p. 37); it was not based on speculation, but rather on interpretive reflexivity developed through our interaction.

2. Comparative Description

2.1 Unequal Mobilities

Both of us came to the UK from other countries, but our processes were very different. I first recognized this gap during the interview. In the following excerpt (Appendix, Lines 15-18), R refers to me as the researcher, and L refers to Layla. The transcript preserves her original wording to reflect her authentic voice:

R: How long have you been in the UK?

L: Four years. And I go seven country before London. I go Somalia, and Dubai, and from Kenya, Kenya from Uganda, Uganda from Libya, Libya from Italy, Italy from France, France from England. One month, one month. (**R:** Ah, very short) Yeah, very short, not too much.

R: But can you explain why you went to these countries?

L: My country, I don't take visa for London, my country she have problem fight. So that's why I travel to another country and another country.

Through this conversation, I realized that her home country, Somalia, faces significant visa obstacles for direct travel to the UK. According to the Henley Passport Index (2026), the Somali passport is ranked near the bottom of the global mobility spectrum, 194th out of 199 countries (at the 97th position, where the lowest is 101st due to tied rankings). Meanwhile, China ranks 55th. Although my country's rank is not very high, it still represents a stark entry difference between us. It is also worth noting that Layla's account — "my country she have problem fight" — points to a dimension beyond passport ranking or bureaucratic friction: her mobility was not simply constrained by administrative barriers, but driven by conditions of conflict and insecurity that made leaving a necessity rather than a choice. This distinction matters, since forced displacement and voluntary international mobility are shaped by different structures of vulnerability (Cresswell, 2010), even where both are captured under the same discourse of "friction." I was able to come to the UK directly, while she had to go through several countries to get here. The low ranking of Somalia implies that Layla is categorized as having "suspicious rhythms" in international movement, which significantly increases her "friction" (Cresswell, 2010, p. 26).

Another part of the interview further illustrates the institutional barriers (Appendix, Lines 91-92):

R: Then you came to England, you started to learn English, for already four years?

L: No, no 4 years. I studied English before I have paper , my passport. Now I got paper, then I go learn English.

Layla's statement, "I learn English when I got paper," reflects the securitization of education, where access to language learning is shaped by broader regimes of control and regulation. Under this framework, she was pressured to provide residency documentation to prove her legal status (Rampton & Charalambous, 2020), rather than being recognized immediately as a learner. Before she obtained the requested files, her previous background in science (Appendix, Line 78) and her aspirations in law remained

invisible; her language ability and intelligence were entirely subordinated to her legal status.

From this perspective, education is no longer a universal right but a conditional privilege. Those who fail to meet the government's administrative regulations are denied access to learning. This securitization is manifested not only at the physical border but also within the daily educational environment, transforming a general right into a privilege contingent upon state validation (Rampton & Charalambous, 2020).

2.2 Recognition vs. Erasure

Both of us were studying English here and had completed our undergraduate programmes in our home countries. However, our starting points in the UK were significantly different (Appendix, Lines 35-38).

> **R:** You are studying in ESOL class, so how do you feel studying in this class? Do you think it helps you?
>
> **L:** Yes. Before I come here, I don't know too much talking English. In school, I don't understand too much. After I go ESOL, I explain, I say I don't understand nothing. I start from beginning, ABCD. Grammar.

I had an English learning background, as we were required to study English as part of compulsory education from the third grade of primary school. In addition, because I passed the IELTS exam, I was granted permission to study my master's degree here. The system in the UK recognized my undergraduate degree and granted me a place as a postgraduate student. My past English study became my linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1977, cited in Creese, 2010, p. 296) for studying in the UK. My English learning has been about accumulation and progression, not starting from zero.

In contrast, language functioned as a barrier in Layla's study life in the UK. From the interview I learned that she had no prior experience of learning English before coming to the UK, and had to start from "ABCD, grammar" in her ESOL class. This was not a reflection of her actual ability, but a "proof" process demanded by a system that only recognises linguistic capital once English proficiency is demonstrated.

Her science background sits differently in the data. Creese (2010) uses "erasure" to describe how institutions invalidate migrants' existing competencies. However, I never asked whether any institution had actually engaged with Layla's scientific background, so I cannot claim institutional erasure in Creese's sense. What I can say is that within her own narrative, her science degree was mentioned only once (Appendix, Line 78) and never returned to, unlike her English learning and legal ambitions, which she spoke about at length. This asymmetry may reflect her own shifting priorities, or a lack of institutional space to recognise it — the data cannot tell us which. What it does show is that her science

background was marginalised within the interview itself, before any institutional process is even considered.

> **R:** I want to know you're studying English right now, did you imagined for your future?
>
> **L:** First I finish study English, I want to come a lawyer. Then I want study law. I finish my study English, then go Dubai. English in Dubai important. That's why I want study faster.
>
> **R:** You said you want to be a lawyer, have you learned anything in law?
>
> **L:** No, my teacher tell me learn English fast, after I give you one teacher who teach you law.

Though I didn't explicitly mention this during the interview, my main motivation for studying a master's degree in the UK was to enhance my competitiveness in the future job market. This degree itself is a symbol of competitiveness. Meanwhile, I also wanted to broaden my horizons. So English is my added value.

For Layla, the situation is different. She couldn't speak English when she arrived, yet she dreams of becoming a lawyer (Appendix, Lines 67-70). However, without English, she has no access to that goal. Khan (2014, p. 8) argues that language tests have become a "shibboleth" —a password for inclusion. For Layla, English itself is that password. It is not an "add-on" to her existing capital, but the key that unlocks her dream of becoming a lawyer.

In short, my past English study became recognized capital, while Layla's science background was erased—and English became the necessary condition she needed to rebuild her future.

2.3 Linguistic Citizenship vs. Standard Language Ideology

Through both the interview and my observations in the ESOL class, I noticed that Layla and I performed differently. She was confident and never seemed afraid of making mistakes in the class, while in the postgraduate classes I attended, I was always worried about making mistakes when I had to speak. I want to explore the underlying ideological roots behind these two contrasting behaviors.

The ESOL class provided Layla with a "safe haven" for people who can barely speak English, it deviates from the strict and rigid evaluative structures of institutionalized learning. As Stroud (2023, pp. 145-146) suggests, Linguistic Citizenship (LC) involves accommodating the "unintelligible" or "incommensurable" semiotic articulations of marginalized speakers. In this class, the teacher and volunteers did not focus on grammar

accuracy, which allowed Layla to exercise her agency and claim "the authority to be heard" (Stroud, 2023, p. 146). Although she may have struggled with linguistic structures, her active participation reflected the emergence of a new subjectivity: she was not just a silent migrant, but a speaker announcing her right to speak and express herself in this language.

Turning to myself, I had studied English for over ten years. Generally speaking, my English proficiency was higher than Layla's, yet I was far more afraid of making mistakes when speaking in front of the class. This fear became even stronger during online classes, where my face would appear on everyone's screen when I spoke. The tension was overwhelming.

Lippi-Green (1994, p. 167) argues that the educational system instills in students a "rocklike conviction" that certain forms are correct and others are wrong. This was what my past English education taught me. English teaching in that context has always focused on exams rather than on everyday communication. From a young age, I was taught what was correct and what was wrong—mistakes meant losing marks. My consistently good grades in English from primary school to high school reinforced this belief. The more I succeeded within this system, the higher my standards became. Over time, this formed the basis of my fear of making mistakes in English as an adult.

As Rosina Lippi-Green (1994, p. 166) further argues, Standard Language ideology operates as part of a broader system of power, shaping what is perceived as "correct" language use. In my case, this ideology was not explicitly imposed in my current learning environment, but had already been internalised through my previous educational experiences. No one at my school required me to speak in a particular way; however, I had already come to accept certain linguistic norms as natural. This reflects how ideological power functions not only through direct enforcement, but also through consent, as individuals reproduce dominant norms without questioning them (Lippi-Green, 1994, p. 166). I did not resist this ideology; instead, I turned it against myself. When I found myself in an English-only environment and realized that I could not meet these internalised standards, I experienced anxiety and a fear of speaking.

In short, Layla exercised linguistic citizenship—she claimed her right to be heard. I, on the other hand, was constrained by standard language ideology—my self-expression was restricted by internalised norms of correctness. These different understandings of what it means to speak English shaped our very different attitudes in the classroom.

2.4 Choice vs. Necessity

Although we are in different conditions regarding our English speaking, we share the same goal while studying in the UK: to improve our English proficiency. However, due to the differences in our English expression, our social networks we are exposed to also

differ, which to some extent further reinforces our original states. Below is a segment from the interview where Layla mentioned her "forced" English learning environment (Appendix, Lines 19-22):

> **R:** Do you think being far from family makes learning English easier or harder?
>
> **L:** I talk to my mom every morning, and easy for I don't have people I talk in my language, that's why I learn too much now.
>
> **R:** Em, so I think it helps you, right? Because you have to speak English.
>
> **L:** Yeah, yes, it help me. I don't have a family here, I don't have friend say Somali here, that's why I talking English, I see every people talk English.

McPherson et al. (2001) said "homophily limits people's social worlds in a way that has powerful implications for the interactions they experience" (p. 415). From this perspective, I have a social network mainly consisting of Chinese peers. My roommate is Chinese, so the language I use most in daily life is Chinese, even within the UK. Additionally, the friends I made at school were mostly Chinese. I found that it is much easier to express myself when speaking Chinese, which makes it easier to build friendships. This reflects the principle of homophily, which "structures network ties of every type, including friendship" (McPherson et al., 2001, p. 415). However, Layla had no family here or friends speaking Somali, cutting off her native language use in the most common social scenarios. When similar others are absent, individuals cannot rely on homophilous ties (McPherson et al., 2001, p. 415); consequently, in order to manage daily life and make new friends, she was compelled to speak English much more frequently.

What's more, Horwitz et al. (1986, p. 127) pointed out that anxiety may lead to avoidance, such as the avoidance of communication. I had a certain tendency to avoid English communication, and I had the opportunity to do so because my social circle was predominantly Chinese-speaking, allowing me to remain within my linguistic comfort zone. In contrast, Layla had almost no chance to escape the challenge. Under these circumstances, Layla practiced more and more, transitioning from being nervous to make mistakes to confidence as she recalled: "Before I scared. I don't want talk because I think I speak wrong. Now I try. If I make mistake, okay. I don't care mistake now. I practice more." (Appendix, Lines 24-26) In contrast, I realized that I might become more anxious without sufficient practice.

Nevertheless, thanks to the placement and the interview with Layla, I discovered people from different countries happily and bravely chatting with each other using limited English skills. In an environment where everyone was striving to improve their English speaking, I also became more courageous in expressing myself in English. It showed me that the fear I had been avoiding was perhaps not as terrifying as I imagined.

3. Summary

In conclusion, comparing the differences between us, I possess institutional advantages but suffer from mental pressure, while Layla endures institutional exclusion but shows her powerful agency.

Our comparison suggests that standardised education can create anxiety, whereas a non-judgemental environment allows us to speak more freely. What I initially saw as just a difference in classroom atmosphere, Cooke et al. (2019, p. 139) provide a deeper perspective through their concept of "sociolinguistic citizenship". This framework helped me understand something much more fundamental: a shift from language education as a process of enforcing standardisation to one that prioritises learners' voice and agency.

For ESOL classes, instead of focusing on grammar correction, encouraging students to speak and not to be afraid of expressing themselves in English might be a better teaching method. This principle also applies to university classrooms. Considering the pressure international students face in academic English environments, higher education institutions need to be more inclusive of multilingual practices. My own experience proved that when I saw imperfect English being bravely expressed, the ideology of standard English in my mind began to loosen—a small but real instance of what Cooke et al. (2019) call "sociolinguistic citizenship" taking shape.

In the end, there is no single "correct English". There are only English-learners with different real-life experiences, each with the right to be heard in this language.

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Appendix – Interview Transcript

Participant: L (Layla, 28, originally from Somalia, grew up in Dubai)
Researcher: R (23, Chinese MA student in the UK)
Location: WhatsApp Video call
Duration: Approximately 30 minutes
Language: English (**Non-native speaker**)

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1 R: Let's start, about the first one, before you coming to England, what did you imagine your life and study would be like? Like imagine your stay here would be nice or hard?

2 L: Before I come here, I tried, here is good and it give me this chance, that's why I come here. I'm good.

3 R: What is your mother language?

4 L: My mother language Somali. I grow up Dubai.

5 R: So how many languages can you speak?

6 L: I speak Somali, Arabic, little bit English.

7 R: Oh your English is good. Then next one is how did you decide to study here?

8 L: Before I come here, I don't know English serious, hard, I don't know who I talk, I don't know who I explain, I go college, I see our teacher, she say "I teach English for free". After I try, I say "I try for you I come". She say "Ok." First time, I want to study here and then get good job.

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9 R: Did anyone in your family influence you?

10 L: Yes, my mom, she come now. She help me too much. She give me money. She say, "Layla, if you want something, you go." She always support me.

11 R: Can you simply explain how your mom helps you?

12 L: I love my mom too much, she trust me too much. She want something she don't back up, she go. I say "mom I want to go London", she say "go". She know me. She support me, she giving me money. And now she say "I proud of you." (Laugh)

13 R: Did you work before you came here?

14 L: Yes, I work before. I work carer in London. I do part-time job. I give in house, give in school, after school, I give home for bus. I take three job I work before.

15 R: How long you been in England?

16 L: Four years. And I go seven country before London. I go Somalia, and Dubai, and from Kenya, Kenya from Uganda, Uganda from Libya, Libya from Italy, Italy from France, France from England. One month, one month. (K: Ah, very short) Yeah, very short, not too much.

17 R: But can you explain why you went to these countries?

18 L: My country, I don't take visa for London, my country she have problem fight. So that's why I travel to another country and another country.

19 R: Ah, I see. Do you think being far from family makes learning English easier or harder?

20 L: I talk to my mom every morning, and easy for I don't have people I talk in my language, that's why I learn too much now.

21 R: Em, so I think it helps you, right? Because you have to speak English.

22 L: Yeah, yes, it help me. I don't have a family here, I don't have friend say Somali here, that's why I talking English, I see every people talk English.

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23 R: When do you feel most confident speaking English?

24 L: Before I scared. I don't want talk because I think I speak wrong.

25 R: I think you did well. Language needs practice. It's okay, you can try.

26 L: Yes, now I try. You listen too much, you learn too much. My country, I don't talk English, that's why I don't know English too much before, now little bit little bit I learn. If I make mistake, okay. I don't care mistake now. I practice more.

27 R: What language do you use with your family?

28 L: My family I speak Arabic. Somali a little bit, or little Arabic. Sometimes I talk Somali with my mom. But with my sister brother, they don't talk Somali, they talk Arabic.

29 R: Do you mix English with your mother language when you talk to other people in England?

30 L: No. Somali and English very different.

31 R: So do you speak English with your friends in your country?

32 L: My country?

33 R: Yes.

34 L: My country people talk English, but as Arabic people they don't talk English. That's why I come from Dubai, I don't talk English.

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35 R: You are studying in ESOL class, so how do you feel studying in this class? Do you think it helps you?

36 L: Yes. Before I come here, I don't know too much talking English. In school, I don't understand too much. After I go ESOL, I explain, I say I don't understand nothing. I start from beginning, ABCD. Grammar.

37 R: From the beginning?

38 L: Yes, from beginning. Teacher explain slow. Now I know more.

39 R: How long have you studied in ESOL class?

40 L: One year.

41 R: Did you study English in your home country?

42 L: No, my country Dubai study Arabic just. My country Somali I don't know. I just stay one month in my country, and grow up in Dubai.

43 R: So in your education, they didn't teach you English right?

44 L: No, I learn Arabic, just Arabic, no English.

45 R: So I wonder, Dubai government, do they teach English, not only you but the whole society?

46 L: All people don't learn English now people change, now my sister she learn English. Like me, don't learn English, just Arabic. Now it change everything.

47 R: How do you feel when you speak to other countries' people in our ESOL class, like some people from Spain?

48 L: Too much people like me, they don't know too much English, in class, sometimes it's funny.

49 R: Because it's hard to explain, right?

50 L: Yeah, sometimes it's funny. Before you got the teacher who know how this word you know, you come good. Before I don't understand teacher, now I know. I listen news every morning. That help me.

51 R: I remembered you told me you are studying in a university in London, do you think there are differences between study in the university and study in ESOL class?

52 L: Yes, different. University you study more high, in ESOL class you study very beginning.

53 R: I want to know in the university you start learning with what, like grammar, words or what?

54 L: From grammar.

55 R: Do you learn new words?

56 L: I learn new words everyday, teacher give me and I learn every morning, after I back to teacher, she ask me and I explain.

57 R: How many classes do you have every week?

58 L: I have 3 ESOL class, and 5 for university.

59 R: Wow, you have lots of classes, I think.

60 L: Yes then I want to learn fast. I try my best.

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61 R: Do you think you are multilingual? Multilingual means you can speak more than one languages.

62 L: Yes. I speak Somali, Arabic, and English. I want learn more language. Maybe Chinese. (**R**: That's cool.) Yes, I want learn.

63 R: Do you feel different when speaking with native English speakers compared to other multilingual learners, like me?

64 L: No, I think all good people speak English.

65 R: Maybe for you just feel the same to learn English , right?

66 L: it's same for me and you. I'm not scared, I speak fast.

67 R: Yeah, I think it's important to not care about others, but that's my problem (laughs). I want to know you're studying English right now, did you imagined for your future?

68 L: First I finish study English, I want to come a lawyer. Then I want study law. I finish my study English, then go Dubai. English in Dubai important. That's why I want study faster.

69 R: You said you want to be a lawyer, have you learned anything in law?

70 L: No, my teacher she tell me learn English fast, after I give you one teacher who teach you law.

71 R: Will you study law in England?

72 L: Yes.

73 R: Ah, you will study law in England and then go back to Dubai to be a lawyer.

74 L: Yes.

75 R: You are really cool, you are 28 now right? Because in China, age is a problem, many people lack courage to study abroad at such age.

76 L: Yes, but it's not hard, you want to learn, you learn, not hard.

77 R: I wanted to know, have you attended university in Dubai?

78 L: Yes, before I finished science in Dubai.

79 R: Wow, you studied science before? Then why you want to change your mind to study law?

80 L: Before I little I want to learn science.

81 R: Ah, so when you were young, you desired to learn science? It's hard isn't it?

82 L: Yes, I'm tired, very hard.

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83 R: You have lived in England for 4 years, what was the biggest challenge?

84 L: English big challenge. Before I go shop, I don't know how I say I want this one. Now I talk I say. Before I don't have some people helping me, I don't know who I talk. But my phone help me, I translation Arabic in English. I give people I say I want this (laugh).

85 R: Then at first it would very hard for you, right?

86 L: Very hard. Too much hard. Learn a second language too hard.

87 R: You don't know a little about English before you come?

88 L: Before I come, I know who are you, where you go, little bit I know, but I don't know much.

89 R: So you came to England alone?

90 L: Yes I come myself.

91 R: That's really hard. Then you came to England, you started to learn English, for already four years?

92 L: No, no 4 years. I studied English before I have paper , my passport. Now I got paper, then I go learn English.

93 R: Then how long have you studied in your university here?

94 L: just one year.

95 R: Then it's similar with ESOL class?

96 L: Yes.

97 R: Wow, then I think you already made a big progress. Thank you so much for the interview.

98 L: Thank you I talk to you.