

Discursive Construction of Learner Identities and Language-learning Ideologies: A Study of IELTS Preparation Posts on Douban

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Abstract—In nowadays globalized context, high-stakes English proficiency tests such as IELTS function as gateways to educational and social mobility, and informal digital platforms have become important sites for meaning-making and identity construction. Focusing on 50 IELTS preparation posts on Douban, a major Chinese interest-based social networking platform, this study used both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine how learner identities are discursively constructed through recurring discursive topics and strategies. Findings suggest that these posts tend to construct learner identities such as the disciplined self-manager, the strategic test-taker, the authentic experience-sharer, and reflective self-improver, each supported by recurring discursive strategies of nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification. At the same time, these identities simultaneously show language ideologies which privilege effort, self-responsibility, and instrumental views of language learning. By exploring the interplay among online discourse, learner identity, and language ideology, this research contributes to broader discussions on language use in digital social media in the context of contemporary English language learning.

Keywords—discourse-historical approach, discourse analysis, identity construction, IELTS, online discourse

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Madaus, a language test is considered high-stakes when its results are seen as the main basis for important decisions which can directly affect people's lives [1]. IELTS, for instance, is a high-stakes language test because participants' score can affect their major life transitions, such as university admission or international migration [2]. Since the results carry such consequences, IELTS has an influence that goes beyond language testing.

In recent years, language learning has undergone a spatial shift from the traditional classrooms to social media and online communities [3]. Within these non-institutional spaces, exam preparation is no longer merely an individual or pedagogical activity, but a collaborative and socially mediated practice. Such environments can enhance learner agency and also serve as important sites where learners construct and negotiate their identities, and where educational ideologies are reproduced [4].

Previous research has examined the impact of high-stakes testing on learning behavior in traditional classroom, however, little attention has been paid to how learners construct and negotiate their identities through everyday preparation discourse in informal online environments. To address this gap, the present study investigates IELTS preparation discourse on Douban, a Chinese interest-based

social platform, with a focus on how learner identities are discursively constructed through the lens of the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) and what kinds of language learning ideologies are showed.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Language Ideology

Kathryn A. Woolard defines language ideology as a shared system of beliefs about language and its social meanings, highlighting its mediating role between social structures and discursive practices [5]. Scholars emphasize how language ideology anchors meaning to speech. Irvine and Gal identify three key mechanisms, namely, iconization (essentializing language as a group trait), erasure (ignoring contradictory diversity), and fractal recursivity (projecting macro-social conflicts onto micro-linguistic differences). These processes naturalize arbitrary differences into social hierarchies [6].

Recent research on language ideology has shifted toward digital and informal spaces, examining how ideologies of techno-solutionism and optimization reframe language learning as a consumerist, data-driven task, just as Durbidge *et al.* illustrated in their article [7].

B. Identity Construction Theory

According to *the Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, identity is the reflexive answer to the question "Who am I?" and the social answer to "Who are you?", which serves as the vital interface between the individual and the social world [8].

In this book, Bamberg *et al.* believe that identity is not built in a vacuum but is discursively constructed through the interplay between macro-social narratives and micro-level interactions. This process requires individuals to navigate three core dilemmas: maintaining a sense of uniqueness while seeking social belonging, balancing internal consistency with the need to adapt to different contexts, and establishing biographical continuity over time despite life's inevitable changes. Ultimately, identity construction is an ongoing, lifelong project of meaning-making that requires both personal exploration and social validation to remain stable and functional within society.

Language learners can show certain kinds of learner identities. Current researches view learner identity as dynamically co-constructed and negotiated through social interactions, power relations, and discursive practices, particularly focusing on the roles of investment, positioning,

and the navigation of identity transitions within specific socio-cultural contexts [9].

C. Discourse-Historical Approach

The Discourse-Historical Approach, proposed by Reisigl and Wodak, is a major method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It focuses on how discourse is embedded in historical contexts and how it contributes to the construction of power relations and ideologies. Central to DHA is the analysis of meaning-making through five types of discursive strategies: nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification or mitigation. These strategies capture different aspects of discourse. Nomination refers to how social actors and events are named and categorized. Predication assigns evaluative qualities to them, either positive or negative. Argumentation provides reasoning that supports or challenges particular claims. Perspectivization highlights how speakers or writers position themselves and express their involvement, while intensification and mitigation adjust the degree of emphasis in discourse, strengthening or softening specific meanings [10].

In practice, DHA analysis generally follows a three-stage procedure. It begins with identifying key discourse topics, then examines how discursive strategies are used to construct meanings and stances, and finally considers how these meanings are realized within broader historical contexts [11].

Initially, DHA was developed for the study of political discourse, but it has since been applied to a range of fields, including identity construction. In recent studies, DHA has also been integrated with corpus linguistic techniques, allowing for more systematic and empirical analysis [12].

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions

(1) What are the dominant discourse topics in IELTS preparation posts on Douban?

(2) How are learner identities constructed through specific discursive strategies, and what underlying language ideologies do these constructions reflect?

B. Research Procedure

This study employed a corpus-assisted Discourse-Historical Approach to analyze IELTS preparation discourse. First, a corpus of 100 experience-sharing posts was formed manually from Douban via searching targeted keywords such as “雅思经验”, “雅思备考” and “雅思高分”. The raw data was then cleaned, removing ads, links, pictures, etc., and then processed via Chinese word segmentation.

Second, the analytical process involves a quantitative screening using AntConc to identify high-frequency keywords and their concordance lines. By examining these terms within their concordance lines, recurring discourse topics are extracted. Finally, a qualitative close reading is conducted to investigate specific discursive strategies, such as nomination and predication. This stage explores how these linguistic choices construct distinct learner identities and reflect broader language ideologies within the context of English language learning in China.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Dominant Discourse Topics in IELTS Preparation Posts in Douban

To explore the dominant discourse topics, high-frequency words were extracted using AntConc, as they highlight the most recurring concerns in the corpus. Top 30 high-frequency words are presented in the following table.

Table 1. Top 30 high-frequency words

Rank	Word	Freq.	Rank	Word	Freq.
1	雅思	268	11	方法	97
2	听力	192	12	题目	92
3	口语	178	13	分数	88
4	阅读	171	14	提高	86
5	写作	156	15	时间	79
6	备考	139	16	复盘	74
7	词汇	128	17	逻辑	69
8	做题	121	18	素材	66
9	练习	116	19	经验	61
10	真题	109	20	听写	53

Based on the high-frequency words, several main discourse topics can be identified. Words related to listening (听力), reading (阅读), speaking (口语), and writing (写作) reflect a focus on skill-based or task-based language learning. Terms such as practice (练习/题目), exercises (做题), and dictation (听写) point to a emphasis on test-oriented practice. Meanwhile, words like methods (方法), time (时间), review (复盘), and logic (逻辑) highlight the importance of strategic learning and self-regulation. In addition, materials (素材) and experience (经验) suggest the role of resource accumulation and shared knowledge, and, scores (分数) and improvement (提高) indicate a clear focus on exam results.

In addition to high-frequency words, a range of less frequent words can further support the identified discourse topics. For example, items like templates (模板), question banks (题库), online courses (网课) and apps reflect the role of external resources where knowledge is packaged through digital platforms rather than traditional institutional channels.

The topics identified above show what IELTS preparation discourse mainly focuses on, especially on skill-based language learning, test-oriented practice, strategic and self-regulated learning, resource-based knowledge construction, and score-oriented goals. To better understand how meaning is constructed, the next section will look at how these topics are expressed using different discursive strategy.

B. Discursive Construction of Learner Identities and Language Ideologies in Douban

1) Nomination strategy

Nomination in the corpus of this study is mainly characterized by categorization. Learners grouped themselves into different types based on proficiency, learning conditions, and study modes, such as self-directed learner (自学党), time-constrained learner (突击型考生), student taking the exam for a second time (二战考生), etc.

Example 1: “我自己就是一边上班一边准备雅思的, 每天时间不多。”

(Example 1: “I was preparing for the IELTS while working full-time, so I did not have much time each day.”)

In example 1, the learner nominates him or her as a full-

time worker preparing for the IELTS. This nomination is realized through the description of working while studying, which categorizes the learner based on their time constraints and life situation. Rather than emphasizing individual traits, the identity is constructed as a type of learner with limited available time. This form of nomination serves to position the speaker within a recognizable group and to justify the need for selective and efficient learning strategies.

Example 2: “我本科是英专，但其实基础也没有很好，口语和写作一开始都不太行。”

(Example 2: “My undergraduate background was in English, but my English proficiency was not that good, and I struggled with speaking and writing at first.”)

In example 2, the poster nominates him or her as an English major, which reflects a form of professional or academic identity. However, this identity is immediately qualified by the statement that their proficiency was not good, thereby weakening its authoritative value. This suggests that professional background is not constructed as a decisive factor in learning success. Instead, the nomination functions primarily to indicate the learner’s starting point, while shifting the focus toward effort and improvement rather than disciplinary identity.

In this way, nomination strategies in IELTS preparation discourse in Douban serve not only to categorize learners but also to construct various meaningful identities such as the authentic experience-sharer. By grouping individuals based on proficiency, learning conditions, and study modes, they frame learning as a structured process and align personal experiences with broader narratives of effort, strategy, and exam success.

2) Predication strategy

Predication involves the discursive assignment of qualities and characteristics to social actors, objects, or processes through evaluative vocabulary and specific rhetorical devices. In the study, learners frequently evaluate different study methods. In doing so, certain norms of learning will be constructed.

Example 3: “一开始我就是疯狂刷题，但其实效果并不好……这样其实是一种假性努力。”

(Example 3: “At first, I just focused on grinding through as many practice tests as possible, but it wasn’t very effective... This was actually a form of ‘pseudo-effort’.”)

In example 3, predication is realized through negative evaluative expressions such as “not effective” and “pseudo-effort,” which assign negative qualities to the practice of doing exercises without reflection. These evaluations not only delegitimize this learning behavior but also implicitly construct a type of ineffective learner who is characterized by superficial effort and lack of strategic awareness.

Example 4: “我后来开始坚持听写，虽然一开始很难，但是真的非常有用，对听力提升帮助很大。坚持一段时间之后，正确率明显提高。”

(Example 4: “Later on, I started to stick with dictation. Although it was quite difficult at first, it turned out to be extremely useful and greatly helped improve my listening skills. After persisting for a while, my accuracy rate improved noticeably.”)

In contrast, in example 4, positive expressions such as “extremely useful” is used to describe dictation, showing

that it is seen as an effective way to improve. It presents dictation as a recommended learning strategy, while also shaping the speaker as a learner who is a reflective self-improver — disciplined and focused on using the right methods.

Taken together, predication plays a key role in shaping how learning practices are understood and evaluated. By labeling certain behaviors as positive and others as negative, the discourse not only guides learners toward preferred strategies but also constructs implicit models of what counts as an effective or ideal learner.

3) Argumentation strategy

Argumentation strategy is used to legitimize particular practices. In IELTS preparation discourse, it often relies on causal reasoning, personal experience, comparison, consequence, etc., to explain why certain methods work.

Example 5: “我后来发现精听比单纯刷题更重要，因为雅思听力考的其实是对细节的理解，如果只是做题而不去分析听不懂的地方，很难真正提高。所以我开始每天做精听和听写，把每一个不懂的地方都弄清楚，慢慢就有了提升。”

(Example 5: “I later realized that intensive listening is more important than simply grinding through practice tests. IELTS listening actually tests your understanding of details; if you just do the exercises without analyzing what you missed, it’s hard to make real progress. So, I started doing intensive listening and dictation every day, making sure I understood every single point I previously missed, and gradually I saw an improvement.”)

In example 5, argumentation is shown through a clear causal structure. The speaker justifies the effectiveness of intensive listening by linking it to the nature of the IELTS listening test. Also, by explaining why certain practices lead to improvement, the speaker constructs a logical connection between learning strategies and outcomes.

Argumentation in IELTS preparation discourse goes beyond accounting for learning practices. It works to normalize a perspective in which language learning is seen as a strategic process closely tied to exam performance. Success is then framed as controllable and attainable through appropriate strategies. Ultimately, these argumentative patterns not only support particular learning choices but also reproduce a meritocratic view.

4) Perspectivization strategy

Perspectivization strategy is realized through linguistic devices that signal the speaker’s viewpoint, positioning, and degree of commitment to what is being said. In this study, this strategy is commonly expressed through first-person markers and experiential expressions, which foreground the speaker’s personal stance and frame advice as subjective rather than universally applicable.

Example 6: “我个人是觉得口语不太需要一开始就追求复杂表达，对我来说先保证流利度更重要。我当时就是先练基本句式，慢慢再加一些高级表达，效果会更好。不过这只是我的一个做法，不一定适合所有人。”

(Example 6: “Personally, I feel that you don’t really need to chase complex expressions at first. For me, ensuring fluency was more important. At the time, I just practiced basic sentence structures first and then gradually added some advanced expressions, which worked out better. But

that's just my approach, and it might not work for everyone.")

In example 6, expressions such as "personally", "I feel" and "for me" clearly indicate that the speaker is speaking from an individual perspective. By grounding the recommendation in personal experience, the speaker presents their learning approach as one possible option rather than a fixed rule. At the same time, the re-statement "that's just my approach, and it might not work for everyone" further limits the scope of the claim. It shows an awareness of contexts. In this way, the advice is both legitimized through experience and softened to allow for alternative perspectives.

Perspectivization contributes to the construction of a particular type of learner identity. By using these perspectivizing markers, posters avoid the identity of a dogmatic instructor who dictates universal rules. Instead, they construct an identity grounded in subjective expertise, where authority is derived from personal success rather than institutional power. This framing creates a democratic discursive space where the learner is presented as a self-aware agent who recognizes the diversity of learning paths.

5) Intensification or mitigation strategy

Intensification and mitigation strategies shape the tone and persuasive force of online educational discourse. In IELTS preparation experiences shared on social media, these strategies are strategically employed to amplify the speaker's authority and the perceived efficacy of certain study methods.

Example 7: "口语我的经验就是, 千万千万不要背答案... 前后表现差距太大真的会被判背题, 而且一背答案... 断句真的很僵硬很明显。"

(Example 7: "For Speaking, my advice is: whatever you do, do NOT memorize answers... If there's a huge gap in your performance between different parts, you'll really be flagged for memorizing. Plus, once you start reciting... your pausing becomes really stiff and obvious.")

Example 7 employs the intensification strategy through lexical reduplication "千万千万" and assertive adverbs "真的". That is to say, this intensification is achieved through a three-fold approach: a sense of emotional urgency, a sense of factual certainty, and a sense of consequential threat. It turns personal advice into a strict reminder, which not only heightens the cautionary tone but also constructs the identity of a seasoned expert who possesses deep insight into exam rules and practical experience.

V. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that informal digital platforms, like Douban, have evolved into critical sites for meaning-making and identity construction beyond traditional institutional settings. By applying the Discourse-Historical Approach, the research identifies how learners employ specific strategies to construct learner identities under the backdrop of preparing high-stakes testing. These discursive practices also internalize language ideologies of self-

responsibility and instrumentalism, framing IELTS success as a controllable outcome of strategic optimization.

While this corpus-assisted study offers an analysis of 50 Douban posts, several limitations remain. For example, the study overlooks the impact of time variables on discursive constructions. The data collection did not strictly account for the specific timestamps, ignoring how identity construction might fluctuate over different periods. Future research should adopt a diachronic and comparative approach by investigating different platforms to see how different digital environments shape learner subjectivities overtime.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Xiaohui Liang conducted the research and wrote the manuscript. Prof. Yi Zhang reviewed the data, gave suggestions and approved the final version. All authors had approved the final version.

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