

**Promoting the Value of Non-Native  
English-Speaking Teachers**

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**Abstract**

There is a common, but mistaken, assumption that language teaching should best be placed in the hands of native speakers. Although the misperception of the superiority of native speaker teachers has been challenged in the professional ELT literature, many continue to hold fast on this misguided belief, often resulting in discriminatory practices towards non-native speaking teachers. The purpose of this paper is to raise greater awareness among stakeholders about this issue, so that they can make more informed decisions about hiring and pedagogical practices. We first look closely at current practices that wittingly or unwittingly support and exacerbate the ideology of native speakerism and then offer some suggestions on how ELT professionals can promote non-native speaker teachers' professional credibility. We also propose a set of qualities that all teachers, regardless of their language or geographical backgrounds, should have.

**Keywords**

ELT, native speaker teacher, non-native speaker teacher, native speakerism, bilingual teacher

## **Introduction**

The increasing growth of learners of English, which is closely linked to the global spread of English and the growing recognition of English as an international language, creates an increasing demand for English teachers. Recent data shows that non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) are estimated to outnumber their native English-speaking counterparts. For example, 80% of the 15 million English teachers worldwide (or around 12 million) are NNESTs (Freeman et.al., 2015). Nevertheless, NNESTs are often perceived to have a lower status than native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) (Mahboob, 2010).

*Native speakerism* - a term coined by Holliday (2005) refers to an ideology that upholds the idea that so-called native speakers (NSs) are the best models and teachers of English because they come from a Western culture from which the ideals of ELT methodology and practices originate.

The idea that native speakers are better language teachers has been seriously challenged by TESOL scholars, chief among these is Phillipson (1992) who strongly argued against the unfounded perception that NESTs were, by nature of their birth place, better ELT instructors. He coined a now familiar term “native speaker fallacy” and claimed that the perceived native speaker superiority was based on weak and unsound reasoning. Likewise, Medgyes (2001, p. 436) draws our attention to the advantages of being NNESTs:

- Provide a better model for their learners;
- Teach more effectively on language-learning strategies
- Provide more information about the target language
- Anticipate language difficulties
- Be more empathetic and responsive to their students
- Use the students’ mother tongue for teaching/learning purposes

The consensus among TESOL scholars now is that a good teacher is a good teacher regardless of their country of origin; and in attempt to eliminate the division of native speakers versus non-native speakers, some scholars have also proposed alternative

terms for NNESTs, such as bilingual or multilingual teachers (McKay, 2002).

The terms NNEST and NEST, however, cannot be magicked away (Pacek, 2005 cited in Floris, 2018). As Medgyes (1992, p. 344) pointed out, “The ELT profession acknowledges the native/non-native distinction, or at least uses it in everyday life”; and when the dichotomy still exists, Medgyes continued, “The question ‘Who’s worth more: the NEST or the non-NEST?’ is bound to arise” (p. 334).

Sadly, in 2019 or 27 years later, the same terms, the same question and the idea of native speakerism are still widespread in the workplace. The debate about who was the ‘best’ kind of teacher of English is still heard; and NNESTs continue to be regarded as less competent from both linguistic and pedagogical perspectives and often subjected to overt or covert discriminations (e.g., a lower pay package, a heavier teaching load). The following sections discuss some of the most obvious discriminatory practices in the workplace.

### **Hiring Policies**

Many NNESTs face discrimination in the hiring process. Moussu (2006), for example, found that the majority of language teaching vacancies listed on the virtual job boards were offered to NESTs only. Mahboob and Golden (2013) maintained that the criterion of ‘nativeness’ was still being required in 79% of the advertisements observed; and 49% of the advertisements stated specific countries that the applicants must reside in. Obviously ‘nativeness’ here is linked to applicants from one of the seven countries, often referred to as the Inner Circle countries (Kachru, 1992). Crump (2007) examined several websites advertising jobs and they showed that the demands for English teachers were high especially in Asia but, “for many of these jobs, the main requirement for the teachers is that they be native speakers of English, not that they be qualified as English language teachers” (p. 12).

Many job ads explicitly or implicitly suggest that the ideal candidate is young, white and Western-looking (Ruecker & Ives, 2014). Furthermore, it was found that the majority of the advertisements focused more on benefits (e.g., living abroad, free tickets) and only 14% pointed to experience as an essential requirement. It is not surprising that a program director once claimed, “We bring plumbers, carpenters, grandmothers, and dairy farmers—those kind of people—to teach English” (Tennant, 2002 cited in Liang, 2009).

Sadly speaking, such hiring policies are even institutionalised in some countries such as China or Japan through visa regulation. “For many NNS English teachers, qualifications, ability, and experience were of little help in the job market where the invisible rule appeared to be No NNS need apply” (Braine, 2013, p. 13).

### **Stakeholders’ Views**

At the same time, many NNESTs also have their legitimacy challenged by their “customers” or stakeholders who express their concerns about their teachers’ language skills and authority in the classroom. The use of the term “customer” or stakeholders here refers to not only students but also parents, employers, publishers, government, and other private and public parties. NNESTs are often viewed as learners of English, and therefore, they are not valued as legitimate authorities to teach.

A study by Mahboob (2003) involving 122 adult English Language Professionals (ELPs) program administrators in the US found that 58.9% highlighted “native speaker” criterion when making hiring decisions as they believed that NESTs had the required proficiency in English and would be qualified language teachers. Kelch and Santana-Williamson’s (2002) study found that students held a more positive attitude towards teachers with native accents. Another study by Reis (2011) also found that students showed a strong preference for British and American accents. As Guerriero stated, “at almost each interview I have attended so far, I have been told that students usually prefer a

native English speaker and because of this, the company's hands are tied" (in Sekino, 2016, par. 20).

Detailed examination by Öztürk and Atay (2010) showed that private schools preferred to employ NESTs in order to increase their school's selling points. This confirms that the presence of NESTs, "has proven itself as an important marketing tool" (Tatar & Yıldız, 2010, p. 114) although the NESTs might have less teaching skills, experiences or academic qualifications.

This also supports Holliday's observation as follows: "I have heard influential employers [in the ELT industry] in Britain say that while they would abolish the discriminatory differentiation between 'native speakers' and 'non-native speakers' tomorrow, they can't because their customers demand it" (2008, p. 121). Thus discriminatory attitudes and practices continue to exist to please parents and students and to secure business.

### **NNEST's Low Self-Confidence**

Interestingly, the native speaker myth is somehow internalized by the "victims" of discrimination themselves. Many NNESTs believe that being a NS is an advantage so they themselves prefer to hire NESTs for their language schools and choose NESTs as their language models. Such a point of views is based on some studies conducted by Llorca & Huguet (2003), Inbar-Lourie's (2001), Samimy & Brutt-Griffler (1999), and Reves & Medgyes (1994) (as cited in Braine, 2005).

A study by Pessoa & Sacchi (2006) revealed that the NNESTs they observed preferred to be passive participants when their NEST colleagues were around. They somehow viewed their NEST colleagues as being more competent, so these NNESTs were reluctant to share their ideas or showcase their abilities. Further findings of this study indicated that NNESTs preferred to assign NESTs for crucial pedagogical responsibilities such as developing the curriculum, improving teaching methods, or teaching more advanced courses.

Studies by Reis (2011 & 2012) found that the self-perception of NNESTs was closely related to their own perception

of an ideal English teacher. A small study towards 11 pre-service teachers taking a “World Englishes” course showed that at the beginning of the course, these student teachers believed that NESTs would serve as the best language teachers because English was the language used as NESTs’ daily communication tool (Floris, 2013). The perception of NNESTs towards their NEST colleagues might be due to the long-held belief that the NESTs were better teachers of English. Such self-perceptions might decrease teachers’ own self-confidence and indicate that they might still consider themselves as being less capable teachers of English.

Native speakerism and the native speaker fallacy which result in discriminatory practices can undermine the value of pedagogical training, teaching skills and professionalism in ELT. Liang (2009) further discusses the consequence of such job discrimination and states that a NNS teacher may face many frustrations and challenges. “These challenges are often disempowering, destroying a NNS teacher’s self-confidence, self-efficacy, and even self-worth” (Liang, 2009, p.163). Unless we find ways to stop discriminatory practices, our profession will not progress beyond its current state.

### **Addressing Native Speakerism and Promoting the Value of NNESTs**

The complex discriminatory practices necessitate robust responses from professional associations, teacher training institutions, school administrators, classroom teachers, researchers, and (social) media influencers. Below are some suggested actions for each of the aforementioned parties to tackle the native speakerism and promote the value of NNESTs.

#### **Professional Associations**

Teachers’ professional associations have a significant role to play in reducing or eliminating the concept of native speakerism by, for example, supporting teachers’ professional development and establishing policies that foster equity for all. TESOL, an

international professional organization, has set a good example. It has clearly stated that both NESTs and NNESTs have the right to obtain equal opportunities (see, Position Statement against Discrimination of Nonnative Speakers of English in the Field of TESOL, TESOL, 2006). TESOL International also has a Non Native English Speaker Teachers Interest Section (NNEST-IS) which addresses issues related to the professional development of NNESTs.

Such initiative needs to get further support from other professional organizations in other countries such as TEFLIN (Indonesia), Braz-TESOL (Brazil), etc. Taking actions when discriminatory practices are found, informing schools on the strengths of NNESTs, encouraging research, publications, and presentations on the role of NNESTs, are some actions that can be considered by these professional associations in our field.

### **Teacher Training Programs**

Teacher training programs should also play a leading role in challenging and changing pre-service and in-service teachers' perspectives towards NNESTs and NESTs. An introduction to the rise in NNESTs movement, the role of English as an International Language (EIL) and its pedagogical implications should be included in teacher training programs.

To give impact to the society, pre-service or in-service teachers who enroll in teacher education programs can be assigned to publish an opinion essay about equality, attend an advocacy campaign and publish a comprehensive report about it, or develop a comic strips or a short video discussing native speakerism to be published via social media. An example of a comic strip developed by our students is available via <http://bit.ly/2LjbMq9>. For more classroom ideas, teachers or teacher educators can visit TEFL Equity Advocates' website (<http://teflequityadvocates.com/>) or refer to Matsuda's Preparing teachers to teach English as an international language (2017) and Floris' Introducing English as an international language (EIL) to pre-service teachers in a World Englishes course (2014).

At the English Department of Petra Christian University, a course on “Teaching English as an International Language” (previously labelled as “World Englishes”) is specifically developed to expose students to the recent development of English and its pedagogical implementation. While this might not be applicable in other contexts, the spirit of NNESTs movement could also be integrated in traditional courses such as “Teaching Methodology” or “Material Development” in which teacher educators can devote one or two sessions to specifically discussing the changing status of English and how it influences the teaching of English.

Such comprehensive training programs will hopefully remind non-native speakers about their potentials, increase their confidence to become English teachers, and motivate them to see NESTs as their equal partners, not their superiors, in the language teaching profession.

### **School Administrators**

School administrators should provide working environments that value and promote equality. Teacher recruitment should be based on education credentials, not the nationality or the place of birth of the applicants. All language teachers should be encouraged to continuously develop their professionalism, for example by attending seminars, joining professional organizations, enrolling for graduate studies, etc. Regular meetings with program administrators and colleagues are also necessary to discuss general issues, to voice concerns, fears and questions in teachers’ day-to-day-teaching. Mentoring and evaluation systems are also necessary as the systems provide feedback about which skills or competency that language teachers need to ‘polish’ or to improve.

It might also be a good idea for the school administrators to employ teachers coming from the inner, outer and expanding circles. By having teachers coming from various parts of the world, students can experience the diversity of English and will have to use English to communicate with people coming from different origins. This mirrors what English speakers do or experience in their daily lives.

In responding to parents' and students' questions about the employment of language teachers, it might be a good idea for program administrators to introduce all language teachers at the beginning of the school year. The introduction should focus on the teachers' educational background, seminars/workshops attended, academic achievements, current and future educational projects, etc.

Maum (2002) believes that such a policy would shift the emphasis in hiring policy from who the job candidates are (i.e. native or non-native speakers) to what they are (i.e. qualified English teachers). The Center for English as a Lingua Franca (CELF) of Tamagawa University in Tokyo, Japan might be one role model for schools or courses that wish to promote equality for NNESTs and NESTs (see Floris, 2016).

### **Classroom Teachers**

Many students prefer native speaker teachers. This might be due to students' lack of knowledge on EIL, native speakerism, how languages should be taught, and what a good language teacher is (Reis, 2011). Classroom teachers should introduce their students to non-native speakers of English whose language is both intelligible and acceptable despite the fact that they do not speak the native speaker variety. This, in the long run, will help educate the students that English does not belong to native-speakers only.

Teachers can use online videos, audio recordings, TV programs to provide systematic exposure to various Englishes spoken by natives and non-natives. Teachers might ask their students to visit The International Dialects of English Archive or Channel News Asia's Live TV to listen to or watch non-native speakers who use English to communicate their thoughts or to share the news with other English speakers from different first language backgrounds.

Social media or teleconference applications such as Skype in Classroom and Facebook also provide features that enable students to communicate with other English speakers. By

communicating and interacting with English speakers outside their classrooms/schools, students will learn that being native or non-native is not important in communication.

The Internet also provides millions of reading texts written by non-native English speakers. News written in English published in Bangkok Post or The Nation (Pakistan) can be used to show how English writers who might not be originated from the inner circle countries can publish good writings.

Classroom teachers also have numerous opportunities to inform their students that a good language teacher is not associated with his/her nationality. Topics such as “My Favorite English Teacher” or “How I Learn English” can be discussed in any English classrooms; and the discussions can further continue with the teachers’ explanation on the characteristics of a good language teacher or techniques to learn and improve English proficiency.

### **Researchers**

There is a growing body of interest in research on NNESTs including “self-perceptions and identities of NNESTs; teaching performance of NESTs and NNESTs; students’ perceptions of NNESTs, and collaboration between NESTs and NNESTs. A substantial amount of scholarly work has also focused on the strengths of NNESTs” (Faez, 2018, p. 1).

More studies on the issue of native speakerism should be further explored. Topics may include particular stakeholder’s reasons for choosing NESTs/NNESTs, or how NNESTs deal with inequality in their workplace. It is also interesting to study how teacher associations or school administrators create a sustainable system to deal with native speakerism and to promote the value of NNESTs.

### **(Social) Media Advocators**

Transforming administrators’, parents’, students’, and society’s reliance on native speakerism is not the sole responsibility of professional organizations, school administrators,

classroom teachers, or teacher training programs. Other parties such as web developers, bloggers or TV program directors can also participate in informing the society about the value of NNESTs.

An example is *Crossroads Café*, a TV drama that featured Romanian, Mexican, Chinese and Egyptian characters who stayed in the United States and had to deal with the issues of multi-ethnicity, culture shock, communicative misunderstanding, etc. During the show's breaks, there were informative segments Cultural Clips and Word Play segments in which various accented speeches, English varieties, or ways of living were highlighted by the narrators. In Korea, this TV program was broadcast by EBS (Korean Educational Broadcasting Station) and had more than 50,000 regular audience; 70% of them were not involved in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) (Shim, 1998). Such a program can help familiarize the community to the existence of EIL and good non-native English speakers and enlighten those who are not well-informed about recent developments of English.

There are also some websites, blogs, or Facebook groups that have been trying to enter the public's consciousness. NNEST of the Month, TEFL Equity Advocates, and Non-native English Teachers Facebook groups for example, have been promoting equal employment opportunities, sharing teaching tips or experiences of NNESTs around the world, and providing spaces to leave comments or feedback. Social media can bring together teachers and other professionals from different places to build network, exchange resources, speak out against discrimination, and increase the presence of NNESTs for a global community.

### **Characteristics of a Good Language Teacher**

The users and uses of English have changed a great deal in the past three decades or so. The requirements and expectations of a good English teacher are now different from the ones in the past. People now agree that being a native speaker, though clearly an advantage, is not and should not be viewed as the most important criterion for someone to become a good teacher of English.

Obviously, all English language teachers need to have a reasonably high level of proficiency in English to carry out their teaching and to serve as a model of competent users of English (Renandya et.al., 2018). This, according to Canale and Swain (1980), includes grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Grammatical competence involves knowledge of vocabulary, grammar rules, word formation, sentence formation, pronunciation, and spelling. This competence refers to one's ability to use the language correctly. Sociolinguistic competence deals with appropriacy in using language. It refers to one's ability to use the language correctly and appropriately in specific social setting or situation. Speakers with high sociolinguistic competence understand that the form, style, degree of politeness of language used at a job interview, for example, are different from the ones used for teaching children. Finally, strategic competence refers to strategies for effective communication especially when communication breakdowns occur. Sometimes problems arise in the communication process although the speakers have good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Strategies such paraphrasing, asking for repetition, guessing, etc are needed when speakers get stuck in conveying their ideas, asking for permissions, etc.

Different schools and countries might have different policies about the required level of teacher's language competency. In Hong Kong, for example, the required minimum level of teacher's proficiency was equivalent to IELTS 7 (Renandya et.al, 2018); while in Malaysia, the required level is C1 of The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Lee, June 2019).

Though advanced language proficiency is essential, this alone is insufficient. Teachers also need to be aware about the, "variation in the use of English on a grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, and discourse level" (McKay, 2018, p. 4), and they need to develop sociolinguistic competence or an ability to use the language appropriately (2018). Strategic competence is also important as it serves to, "repair breakdowns in communication, clarify meaning, or request further information" (2018, pp. 4-5),

especially in situations where misunderstandings occur because of lack of knowledge and skills in English or because of cultural differences among the speakers. Both sociolinguistic and strategic competence are essential and should be viewed as integral components in addition to the language competence of teachers.

Besides language proficiency, teachers of English also need solid disciplinary and content knowledge (Doğançay-Aktuna and Hardman, 2018). Disciplinary knowledge refers to deep understanding, “about the nature of language, language learning, and language teaching” (2018, p. 1) and pedagogical content knowledge is knowledge of, “practical teaching skills/strategies that they can use to make their teaching contextually appropriate and effective” (2018, p.1). In the era of English as an international language, teachers need to be able to use their disciplinary and content knowledge to develop teaching methods that cater to the needs of various uses, users, and contexts of English. In other words, “teachers need to be able to undertake careful needs assessment of their students, set realistic teaching goals, determine the most effective means for helping students achieve these goals—whether it be through clearly defined tasks, pattern practice, or communicative exchanges—and finally assess students’ achievement of the stated teaching objectives” (McKay, 2018, p. 5).

Today’s English teachers also need to take on EIL-specific roles when teaching their students. Renandya (2012) for example, suggests that teachers need to take on such roles as advocate of World Englishes, promoter of multilingualism and multiculturalism, critical textbook user or writer, and critical user of teaching methodology. These roles might be different from what we had in the past. This is because the teaching of English is now being taught in a great variety of learning contexts for learners living in various school/course settings that may require new concepts of the appropriate role of teachers.

Brown (2012, p. 151) writes that a good language teacher today should also possess a skill set that would help them become an effective EIL teacher. Some of these are listed below:

- they should know their students' native language and culture;
- they should know what elements or factors are crucial for instructed language acquisition;
- they should be able to use students' L1 to explain concepts in a most efficient manner;
- they should serve as an excellent model of successful English learners;
- they should be able evaluate and adapt teaching methods and materials to suite the local needs;
- they should know the expectations of administrators, students, and their parents.

Interestingly, unlike their NEST counterparts, qualified NNESTs seem to already possess the skill set above. We suggest they should capitalize on this and turn it to their advantage.

### **Conclusion**

For many people, NESTs are often perceived as superior to NNESTs. This omnipresent, yet unfounded, belief often leads to discriminatory practices against the local NNESTs. In today's globalized world, however, being a native or a non-native teacher should not really matter. Teachers should be judged on the basis of their academic qualifications, professional competence and experience, not their native/non-native status. We urge ELT professionals and scholars to take more active and proactive roles to challenge this misperception. It may take some time to accept the fact that professionally qualified NNESTs can be as good as (or even better than) equally qualified NESTs, but we feel it is time worth spending. And if we work together, the process can be less daunting and the goal may be achieved in a much shorter time.

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