

Native-Speakerism

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Framing the Issue

Native-speakerism is an ideology that upholds the idea that so-called “native speakers” are the best models and teachers of English because they represent a “Western culture” from which spring the ideals both of English and of the methodology for teaching it (Holliday, 2005, p. 6). As an ideology, it is a system of ideas that represents a distorted worldview that supports a particular vested interest. The vested interest in the case of native-speakerism is the promotion by the ELT industry of the so-called “native speaker” brand. The realization that this is an ideologically constructed brand derives from Phillipson’s (1992) linguistic imperialism thesis that the concept of the “native speaker” as a superior model and teacher was explicitly constructed by American and British aid agencies in the 1960s to support their agenda of spreading English as a global product.

Further indication that the “native speaker” brand is an ideological construction is that the native/non-native speaker distinction is not self-evident on technical linguistic or even nationality grounds. It is instead a professionally popularized distinction that has been falsely associated with cultural orientation (Kubota & Lin, 2006). Teachers who are labeled “native speakers” have been falsely idealized as organized and autonomous in fitting with the common yet mistaken description of so-called “individualist cultures” of the West; while teachers who are labeled “non-native speakers” are demonized as deficient in these attributes in fitting with the common yet mistaken description of so-called “collectivist cultures” of the non-West (Holliday, 2005, p. 19, citing Kubota, Kumaravadivelu, Nayar, and Pennycook). The collectivist stereotype is itself considered to be a Western construction of non-Western cultural deficiency. An example of this is a British teacher’s reference to a superior “native speaker” “birthright” at the same time as criticizing, albeit without foundation, not only the linguistic and pedagogic performance, but also the cultural background and proficiency of his “non-native speaker” colleagues (Holliday & Aboshiha, 2009, p. 667).

The Othering of teachers who are labeled “non-native speakers” therefore results in a cultural disbelief—not believing in their ability to teach English within

a Western, and indeed superficially constructed “learning group ideal” that is characterized by “active” oral expression, initiation, self-direction, and students working in groups and pairs (Holliday, 2005, p. 44). The association of the “non-native speaker” label with deficiency is also deeply rooted within a wider and equally mistaken Western perception that people from non-Western cultural backgrounds are unable to be critical and self-determined.

Native-speakerism is also neo-racist on two counts. First, race is implicit in the cultural Othering of “non-native speaker” teachers. It is now established within critical sociology that any description of “other cultures” that defines and predicts how people are going to behave is in fact racist. “Culture” thus becomes a euphemism for race. Indeed, the persistence of native-speakerism resides in it being hidden beneath an apparently “inclusive” and “nice” professional veneer that celebrates cultural difference (Kubota & Lin, 2006). Native-speakerists are therefore likely to naively convince themselves that they are protecting “non-native speakers” from having to do what “native speakers” are able to do. This mirrors a wider “West as steward” discourse in which the West assumes the patronizing role of looking after the non-West (Holliday, 2013, p. 110).

The second count of racism in native-speakerism is evident in the discriminatory employment practices that go far beyond the English-speaking West, where all types of language teaching institutions and their “customers” commonly show an albeit mistaken preference for “native speaker” teachers (e.g., Lengeling & Mora Pablo, 2012). However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that this marketing of “native speaker” teachers is less to do with language and more to do with an association with “whiteness.” This is implicit in job advertisements that specify teachers from “Center” English-speaking countries. At the same time, “non-white” teachers who have spoken English from birth are categorized either implicitly or explicitly as “non-native speakers.” The use of the term “customer” is significant here. It is intended to include not only students but also their parents, employers, and sponsors, as well as the diverse private and public sector sources of support for such institutions, from publishers to government. In such an environment, where native-speakerism is dominant, especially within a neoliberal climate, citing “native speaker” teachers becomes a false marker of quality.

Making the Case

The vested interests of native-speakerism are therefore multidirectional. They can impact on a wide range of professional and other settings, where the ideology provides a default and often tacit image of English and how it should be taught, against which teachers, academics, students, and other members of the public position themselves either in resistance or compliance and many shades in between. This is evident not only in teacher and student struggles to construct language and cultural identity on both sides of the so-called native/non-native speaker divide, but also in perceptions of English and culture in bilingual families

and diaspora as well as academic journals (Swan, Aboshiha, & Holliday, 2015). Native-speakerism continues deeply and relentlessly to reduce the academic and professional status of those it labels (Kumaravadivelu, 2016). The commodification of teachers who are labeled “native speakers” also extends to them being defined within a speakerhood role which does not recognize their wider professionalism.

There has been considerable acknowledgment that the native/non-native speaker distinction is problematic. Using the “native speaker” label as a criterion for employment has been banned by professional bodies such as TESOL and BAAL. The native/non-native speaker issue has also been discussed extensively in the literature and research, especially in the Non-Native English Speakers in TESOL Interest Section. Nevertheless, the terms “native speaker” and “non-native speaker” continue to be an everyday currency for talking about professional difference. Despite its continued damaging impact on how colleagues in the profession are perceived, by themselves, their students, and the wider society, it is increasingly clear that native-speakerism as an ideology remains deeply embedded. There are a number of reasons why this is the case.

The ideology of native-speakerism is largely denied within the ELT profession (Holliday & Aboshiha, 2009). Partly due to the modernism implicit in all professions, the native/non-native speaker distinction is constructed as real, harmless, and indeed useful, as long as it is thought to be used carefully and objectively and as long as employment discrimination is legislated against. A particularly dangerous aspect of native-speakerism is that it tries to construct a sense of equality of opportunity by emphasizing that teachers who are labeled “native speakers” and “non-native speakers” can be treated as separate types of professionals with separate qualities and therefore separate rights that pertain to these qualities. Being separate but equal is further encouraged by the continued common belief that teachers who are labeled “non-native speakers” have a separate and exclusive ability to understand what it is like to learn English in their own countries. Hence, while it is acknowledged that they have the right to compete for jobs everywhere, it is not really expected that they will, not because there is the false belief that there is something deep in their nature that will make them not wish to. Native-speakerism further supports this notion of deficiency by encouraging the idea that teachers who are labeled “non-native speakers” will have greater difficulty traveling across cultural boundaries to work in distant locations. This false notion is grounded in the mistaken belief described above that they do not come from so-called individualist cultures and therefore find it harder to behave autonomously in settings outside their natural so-called collectivist environments.

Much established research into the native/non-native speaker issue also feeds the notion that the distinction is real. While there is a clear objective to challenge native-speakerist inequality, ironically, within an objectivist, positivist tradition, much research begins with the notion that there really are two types of teacher, with the aim of researching their differences, respective characteristics, and contributions. This comparative research has also become a common topic for

dissertations and theses in university teacher education programs, perhaps more as a point of interest than as a means for raising critical awareness. Kumaravadivelu (2016) argues strongly that such research does nothing but strengthen the hegemony of native-speakerism. The development of standardized acronyms such as NS and NNS, and NEST and NNEST further fix the concepts as definable and measurable entities that need to be researched further. Employing easy acronyms serves to professionally routinize, normalize, or reify the native/non-native speaker distinction as a domesticated, thinking-as-usual professional routine. On the other hand, for many teachers who are labeled “non-native speakers,” these acronyms serve as an activist springboard from which to launch opposition. Nevertheless, the problem with using the “non-native speaker” label as an activist platform is that, unlike race labels, the majority of professionals just do not appreciate its political implication, and therefore the label persists in a domesticated form.

Pedagogic Implications

The pedagogical implications of native-speakerism stretch far beyond the classroom to attitudes and values that both pervade the whole ELT profession and extend to society as a whole, wherever English teaching and learning are considered to be an important activity. The origins of the ideology in postcolonial actions of the past cannot now be undone. It is the progress and implication of these actions that now need to be addressed. Within classrooms, this is to do with the way in which English and its teaching are presented by all parties, ranging from teachers, to textbook writers, curriculum designers, and school managers.

An important area for this action might be undoing the preoccupation with so-called “native speaker” language culture on which native-speakerism is built. This means shifting the perception of what makes English authentic away from what amounts to a constructed “American” or “British” culture, and toward language that is meaningfully rooted in the lived experiences of students. This requires a more multilingual and multicultural approach to English. The viability of this shift relates to a wide-ranging discussion about the role of English in the world. An example is the case of Chinese secondary and primary education reported in Gong and Holliday (2013). Students from rural areas, in their decentered criticality, reject the “native speaker” cultural content of their textbooks in favor of a deeply cosmopolitan desire to engage with the world on their own terms.

A non-native-speakerist curriculum would therefore focus on language students and teachers employing their existing cultural and linguistic experience to engage creatively with a cosmopolitan world. This shift has an important implication for teachers. They must themselves struggle to move away from basing their professional knowledge on “American” or “British” language and culture to a broader grounding in the sociolinguistics and cultural studies of how the backgrounds of their students relate to a wider cosmopolitan world. They need to be grounded in the possibilities of an English that expresses the cultural realities of their students.

This does not mean that there cannot be an engagement with language forms and literatures that are generated by particular cultural backgrounds. This is not arguing for a culture-free lingua franca approach. It means instead that such engagement with the foreign should be with full knowledge of the politics of representation that underpin such realities. The experience that students bring with them in this respect is of how these linguistic and cultural forces operate in their own society. This experience is there from an early age, but in tacit forms that teachers need to help their students to externalize. The concept of critical pedagogy may seem relevant here, as long as there is no hint of a Western-led liberationism.

There also needs to be a shift in perceptions about what our students are able to do, and away from the prejudice that “activity” in language learning is rooted in a mistaken sense of individualism, criticality, and autonomy that is only found in the West. This shift will directly counter the cultural disbelief, referred to above, that is implicit in native-speakerism. The process of shifting from cultural disbelief to cultural belief—that non-Western people “can,” just like everyone else, rather than “cannot”—requires starting with the principle that people from all cultural backgrounds are equally able in all respects, and that this ability is enriched by diversity. This appreciation of hitherto unexpected cultural contributions comes from a number of sources in critical sociology, where it is argued that the margins that have been unrecognized by the West are now claiming center-stage (e.g., Hall, 1991).

Students themselves need to be encouraged to participate in this colonization of the center; and to do so they need to be educated in the politics of English as a world language. This contribution of the students grows naturally from the recognition of their innate critical intelligence and also implies a healthy shift to a more multilingual approach and away from the English-only approach that has been revealed to us as a fallacy by Phillipson (1992). Language ability must therefore be rooted in knowledge and a broader educational base, and be moved on from the narrow, skills-based instrumentality of the “learning group ideal” referred to above. Such a broader educational approach will also serve to accommodate a broader richness of cultural experience and classroom behaviors.

This more critical cosmopolitan approach also serves to undo any notion that teachers who have been labeled “non-native speakers” are geographically limited in their roles. Instead, cultural belief recognizes and indeed capitalizes on the hitherto unrecognized cultural experience that teachers bring with them, whoever they may be and from whatever cultural background. Cultural travel in particular must be appreciated as an immense resource because of the greater diversity of experience it brings. Within the current global politics, where there is a mistaken belief that the West has the monopoly on English and criticality, teachers who travel from elsewhere thus carry with them the valuable contribution of decentered Englishes and decentered criticality. In this new non-native-speakerist order, the ability to teach would be disconnected from place of birth or perceptions of what is the mother tongue; and multilingual and multicultural pasts will be considered an added advantage.

Taking action against the embedded acceptance within the ELT profession that the native/non-native speaker distinction is real and harmless requires a radical

removal of the core terminology that underpins it. This viewpoint follows that of Kumaravadivelu (2016) in believing that there needs to be a quite radical paradigm change in the way that we think of and talk about teachers, as speakers and users of English, without using the terms “native speaker” and “non-native speaker.” Not using the common acronyms such as NS and NNS, and NEST and NNEST, and taking the more laborious route of always putting “native speaker” and “non-native speaker” in inverted commas reminds us, in every paragraph, that they are “so-called.” To go further and repeatedly spell out the concept of “teachers who are labeled as” makes it clear that using the terms is a labeling activity that does not actually correspond to who the teachers actually are, and that using the terms represents a discourse that keeps the ideology of native-speakerism alive. A definition of discourse which is meaningful here is a way of talking about things and presenting ideas that promotes a particular ideology. Power is added to discourses by virtue of them often being unconscious and between the lines of everyday communication. Undoing the discourse and the ideology that it serves therefore requires hard work and attention to the detail of how we communicate with each other. It may of course be possible for a native/non-native speaker discourse to exist outside the ideology of native-speakerism, for example, where the teaching of a particular language is not associated with a global cultural politics. This seems not to be possible in the case of ELT because of its global politics. The same work has to be done as with gender, race, and sexuality, taking constant action against prejudices that linger deep within our way of being. This action needs to be taken throughout the ELT profession, in teacher education, research, curriculum development, and so on.

SEE ALSO: NNESTs; Race and Ethnicity in Teacher Education; Race, Ethnicity, and NNESTs; Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Stereotypes in Teaching English

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Suggested Readings

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