

Why must I sound ‘native’ to teaching English? -language discrimination in job recruitments

Linshan Teng

Foreign language college Qingdao City University, China

Abstract: Nowadays, under the background of English has become the most widely spoken language all around the world, more and more people choose to take up English relevant occupations. People who are fluent in English or being identified as ‘native English speaker’ often gain more privileged than not proficient counterparts in job hiring context. This phenomenon is extremely predominant in English language teaching (ELT) field. For many school recruiters, if the candidates are ‘native-English-speaker’ or sounding ‘native-like level’ may outweigh their professional qualifications or personal abilities. However, categorizing people in such dichotomy is criticized by many scholars as ‘native speakerism’ which has negative impact on both native English-speaking teachers and non-native English-speaking teachers. As English has its unique dominant positions among all the other languages in ELT workplace, more attention needs to be paid, and more actions needs to be done to eliminate this discrimination. Therefore, in this paper, I try to explore the ELT in meso-level, and plan to address two questions: firstly, why the label of “native” or “non-native” could lead a potential employment discrimination in ELT? Secondly, since fewer scholars have noticed ELT from the meso-level, I will argue that the school administrators, as the active agency in ELT, their attitudes also play a pivotal role in hiring practices. Moreover, I will give my suggestions about what we can do to help recruiters create a more equal hiring environments in ELT.

Keywords: Native speakerism; English language teaching; administrators, hiring practices; native English-speaking teacher; non-native English-speaking teacher

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1 Introduction

1.1 Native speakerism, a problematic term in ELT

Differentiating candidates between native English-speaking teachers (NEST) and nonnative English-speaking teachers (NNEST) in English language teaching field is often condemned to be native speakerism (NS) (Holliday, 2006). NS is a prejudiced ideology or belief in the ELT profession which indicates that NESTs are ideal language models and carried the superior English language teaching methodology (Maganaka, 2023). Conversely, those being defined as ‘non-native speakers’ are viewed as outsiders and second-class citizens comparing with the English-speaking colleagues and this could in turn influence their professional identities and self-efficacy (Daound & Kaszatalaska, 2022; Llurda & Calvet-Terré, 2022). Furthermore, the preference of ‘native speakers’ in employment practices is criticized by many scholars as inequality, racism or social injustice and being defined as ‘native speaker fallacy’ (Phillipson, 1992; Daound & Kaszatalaska, 2022; Kickowiak, 2020; Lowe, 2020; Liu, 2021; Maganaka, 2023; Llurda & Calvet-Terré, 2022; Silva, Hauber-Özer & Chan, 2025). However, in English teacher hiring practices, unfortunately, a large body of research has observed that the concept of native speakerism still exists and NNESTs still undergoes a degree of microaggression in the aspects of salary or workplace situations (Daound & Kaszatalaska, 2022; Liu, 2021; Lim & Park, 2022; Maganaka, 2023; Hiratsuka et al., 2023). More than that, the ideology of NS is so strong and deeply rooted in ESL professions that it will even directly impact the hiring policies for the school administrators. Nowadays, even if much research on ELT hiring can provide evidence that recruiters did take teaching experience, qualifications as important hiring criteria, but English accent, nationality, native or non-native speaker were still the first and most significant area that recruiters cared about (Llurda & Calvet-Terré, 2022; Thompson & Asanov, 2024). However, native speakers, even who have no relevant teaching experience or qualifications can be hired (Daound & Kaszatalaska, 2022). Obviously, it reflects an inherently systematic prejudice in ELT industry and immediate changes from the meso-level are needed. Thus, after a review of several articles in this field, I argue that NS is a problematic term in ELT advertisement and should be identified as language discrimination in ELT hiring practices. In the following two parts, I would discuss and explain this argument in detail.

1.2 Native speakerism in ELT hiring practices

Evidently, under the process of economic globalization, English is indeed becoming more and more influential and subsequently, its dominant impact on education has also been manifested: the definition of ‘native speakers’ (i.e., inner-circle citizens whose first language are English), teaching beliefs (i.e., student should learn ‘standard English’) or teaching practices (Maganaka, 2023). Similarly, in ELT(hiring practice, Maganaka (2023) has implied that school administrators often have an explicit tendency when recruiting ELT teachers, that is, a white and western-looking image person who is from British, American, Canada or other “inner circle” English varieties. More than that, candidates who are defined as ‘native speaker’ seem to have an inborn teaching pedagogies or abilities that they do not need training or further education, and their English education background such as TESOL, or applied linguistics are often omitted (Kiczowski, 2020; Hiratsuka et al., 2023). What makes it worse is that schools or universities may not be aware that they are accepting and implementing the ideology of racism and language discrimination since they just think NESTs can speak a more ‘standard’ variety of English and a more fluent ‘native-like’ English than NNESTs. Their overemphasis on the ‘native’ variety of English may have an adverse effect on both the teachers and students: NNESTs may doubt their English proficiency and teaching skills, considering that they are not ‘authentic’ English language users or owners; students may lose chance to engage in diverse cultures and it may mislead students’ attitudes towards other English varieties all over

the world. Moreover, another widespread belief in ELT employment discourse which influence the hiring policies is that students prefer NESTs in the classroom. Interestingly, Kiczkowiak (2023) has pointed out there is no solid evidence to support it. Conversely, they value the teachers who are high qualified, easy-going and have the ability to make the knowledge more comprehensible and interesting, and respect students' different culture background more than whether they are 'native' or not (Kiczkowiak, 2023).

Another concerning issue happens in ELT job advertisements. Schools and universities often take 'native-like' or 'native-speaker' as benchmark, unveiling a social trend, value and belief which reinforce the spread of biased NS ideology continually (Kiczkowiak, 2023; Thompson & Asanov (2024). Such advertisements highlighting the need for 'native English speaker' and often described their positions as having an exotic foreign teaching adventure, high salary or benefits rather than emphasizing the teaching qualifications experience, teaching skills and other necessary professional quality or providing opportunities for their professional developments (Maganaka, 2023).

Compared with the NNEST who must have at least a bachelor of degree in either TESOL or applied linguistic, NESTs are indeed enjoying more privileges in ELT hiring (Maganaka, 2023). However, I may argue that native speakerism is actually opposed to both non-native English-speaking teachers and native English-speaking teachers.

1.3 Native speakerism is a discrimination against both NESTs and NNESTs

In ELT hiring practices, the ideology of NS has a negative impact on both 'native' and 'nonnative speakers', though NESTs seem to enjoy more priority (Maganaka, 2023; Liu, 2021; Kiczkowiak, 2020). Firstly, teachers who may not category themselves in this dichotomy may start to fall into negative self-inspect. (Lowe, 2020). With regards to NESTs, in EFL (i.e. English as a Foreign Language) countries, their academic abilities have been overlooked or undermined. From the view of school administrators, the foreign teachers they hired are mainly allocated to teach spoken English even in the university (Maganaka, 2023). More than that, NESTs are often excluded from the local academic activities which can promote and develop their ELT professions since they cannot communicate with local teachers in EFL countries, and their existence is viewed as 'uncomfortable' and 'awkward' by school administrators and other local teachers in academic meetings (Liu, 2021). However, both NESTs and NNESTs are a member of school faculty when they have been hired, and it is necessary for them to be trained and educated to improve their teaching pedagogies. Also, communicating and collaborating with colleagues is also an indispensable part in their work. But school recruiters often narrow down and undermine NESTs' academic domain and at the same time, impede the development of professional improvements for both NESTs and NNESTs. Furthermore, the ideology of racism also happens in ELT hiring program, NESTs are rejected for they do not have western-looking or the nationality of 'inner' countries, reflecting other stereotypes and prejudice of them (Maganaka, 2023; Silva et al., 2025). Thus, it is clear that even for the NESTs, the discrimination still exists hidden behind in the recruiting assumptions and working practices.

On the other hand, for NNESTs, school managements' preference of 'native speaker' may discourage their efforts to achieve equal level with NESTs (Lim & Park, 2022; Hiratsuka et al., 2023). Some studies have pointed out, though the NNESTs have higher degree of academic backgrounds or qualifications than NESTs, they still lack confidence when communicating or collaborating with NNESTs and the reason is just for they think they are not 'native-English' speakers (Lim & Park, 2022; Liu, 2021). But in fact, whether the candidates are 'native' or not, there is no evidence to prove that they have connection with teachers' teaching abilities and efficacy (Kiczkowiak, 2020). Some NESTs even start to depreciate their teaching abilities and undermine their personal devotion in EFL teaching practices despite having a systematic training and qualified teaching certification. Moreover, the payments and treatment for NNESTs teachers are often worse than NESTs', but the recruiters still ignore the inequality and take these as reasonable.

Additionally, NS may have a detrimental effect on students' learning efficacy and future developments. Firstly, Students are misguided to speak only what school administrators perceived as the most 'standard' or 'authentic' English which will in turn influence their perspectives to the diverse varieties of English. However, in the future, when the students encounter clients or customers who are not from 'inner circle' countries and speak other varieties of English such as African American English, India English etc., the lack of language education and culture preparation may also cause misunderstandings and embarrassment in the work. As a result, students may fail the working tasks.

Above all, I have discussed the problematic term native speakerism within the ELT hiring practices, and how the negative effect will function among NESTs, NNESTs and students. In the next part of my paper, why I focus on the meso-level of ELT and some implications and suggestions for school administrators and recruiters are presented.

2 The role of school administrators in EFL employment practices

As I have discussed above, the pro-naiveness mentality is long-standing in the global ELT hiring practices. Much research emphasizes the negative impact on the micro level of the agency (i.e., NESTs, NNESTs and students) but only a small amount of research targeted at the ELF agency in meso-level, the attitudes of school administrators. Thus, I suggest that school administrators or other recruiters play active and pivotal roles in ELF employments. Their duties include enacting and implementing hiring policies, distributing work and training teachers, and more importantly, creating an equal opportunity and hiring environment to both 'native' and 'non-native' candidates (Liu, 2021). However, they are the groups who often have fallen into 'native speakerism fallacy', but also who have the 'power' to change the ELF hiring practices. Thus, the need for them to be aware of the unequal hiring and workplace situations is urge and indispensable.

As the consistent and comprehensible suggestions for ELF recruiters are often absent in previous studies, in the following section, I will conclude some implications based on review of articles and give some new but probably immature suggestions for recruiters from my own thoughts and ideals.

3 Implications and suggestions

Firstly, I would argue that recruiting managers should stop divide the candidates into 'native' or 'non-native' English speakers in ELT

hiring practices. As Hiratsuka et al. (2023) pointed out that English language teaching field should step over emphasizing native speakerism but perceived non-native English-speaking teachers as completely qualified, parts of ELT members and being treated as equals. English proficiency is an important hiring criterion, but it should not be assessed by the candidates' L1 background, nationalities, or other innate features that are unchangeable. Furthermore, high qualified teaching certification or educational background, teaching experiences and skills should be given equal weight as English proficiency (Maganaka, 2023). In my perspective, if the school administrators implement the same and equal hiring policies, NNESTs will not be exposed to the environment that there are 'not authentic' and for foreign teachers, their other academic abilities can also be appreciated instead of just their accent. More importantly, recruiters' hiring policies can also influence how the students perceive the world. It is also their duty to make students realize that the world is multicultural, and they should respect the diversity rather than differentiate what is 'us' and 'them'.

Secondly, one crucial role of school administrators that often being neglected is the responsibilities of training teachers. The trainings should not just include the instructions on teaching methods, skills, or other professional education, more importantly, helping teachers build the awareness of language equalities and culture diversities. Such actions can create a comfortable environment for both local and foreign teachers to communicate and collaborate with each other to make progress in teaching practices.

Similarly, for the recruiters themselves, they are expected to have a more open mind towards the candidates who are from different cultures and be open to talk with them, knowing their teaching attitudes, performances in class and problems they are facing, providing help in time (Llurda & Calvet-Terré, 2022). As Hiratsuka et al. (2023) proposed that they should embrace the new ideology- trans-speakerism which is an ideology accepting and valuing language teachers' various personalities, professional achievements and experiences but ignore candidates' first languages or nations. In other words, all the applicants who are well-qualified, eager to teach and respect the diversity of cultures should be given the equal opportunities to participate in ELT (Lim and Park, 2022).

4 Conclusion

This paper mainly discusses one widespread but unsolved problem – native speakerism in ELT hiring practices and how it be accepted and implemented by the school administrators. By exploring the negative impact of NS on both teachers and students, I argue that school administrators should notice the discrimination and inequalities in the ELT employment and then I give some suggestions for them to create a more equal hiring environment and a more inclusive working practices for the teachers.

In ELT hiring practicing, the form of native speakerism is also changing and realized in different language contexts. However, this problematic ideology will eventually do harm on the students who is both the attendees and transmitter of the knowledge. Thus, not just scholars in this field should appeal to oppose the employment inequalities, but also the societies, organizations and even governments should notice the spread of native-speakerism and making joint efforts to build an equal ELT hiring environment.

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