

Deconstructing the Native and Non-Native Dichotomy in English Language Teaching

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), about 80 percent of the 15 million English teachers are speakers of English as a second language or foreign teachers, who are considered non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) (Moussu, 2018; Selvi, 2019). However, NNESTs faced significant discrimination. Despite receiving professional training as English educators, many struggled to find employment. In contrast, native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) can easily secure positions as English teachers based solely on their ethnicity and skin colour, rather than their qualifications or teaching abilities (Lee & Chan, 2023; Trent, 2016; Widodo et al., 2020). The result is the NNESTs movement, which began in the 1980s to call for equal treatment for NNESTs (Medgyes, 1983; Paikeday, 1985).

With globalization and social mobility, it is estimated that English language learners are about 1.5 billion, which outnumber their native counterparts (Jenkins, 2015). In China, there are more than 400 million English learners (Galloway, 2017). As a result, English is regarded as an international language. Researchers have begun to argue that it is impossible and not necessary to speak sounds like a native English speaker (Jenkins, 2011, 2015). The framework of Global English (GE) urges language educators to revisit the model and goal of English language learning (Prabjandee & Fang, 2022). However, native speakerism, which prioritizes the status of NESTs, is still a prevailing ideology that greatly influences the ELT field (Yang & Forbes, 2025).

1.2 Structure of the essay

In this essay, I will first explore the definition of NESTs and NNEST. Based on the dichotomy between NESTs and NNESTs, I will then examine the research on the perceived differences of NESTs and NNESTs from both student and teacher perspectives. The influence of the perceived

differences on pedagogical practices will also be elaborated. Following that, I will discuss the critics of the dichotomy by introducing the concept of the native speaker fallacy. NNEST's experience of discrimination, marginalization and self-marginalization will be presented. Additionally, the essay will argue for moving beyond the NEST/NNEST divide and will explore the development of GE and how NNESTs construct and negotiate their professional identities in a globalized world.

2. Understanding the NESTs–NNESTs Dichotomy

2.1 Defining NESTs and NNESTs

The definitions of native speaker (NS), non-native speaker (NNS), and, by extension, native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) are complex. According to Chomsky (1965), native speaker of a particular language is someone who acquires that language in a natural environment as his or her first language and who has been exposed to it since childhood. Based on this understanding, NESTs are those teachers who use English as their first language, coming from one of the BANA countries, that is, Britain, Australia, New Zealand and North America (Copland et al., 2020). NNESTs are those teachers who use English as their second language or a foreign language.

However, categorizing speakers depending on whether English is their first language is problematic. Adopting Kachru et al.'s (2006) classification, NESTs are more commonly understood as teachers born and raised in "inner-circle" English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and New Zealand, as well as certain "outer-circle" countries like South Africa and Singapore (Deng, 2024).

However, there remains a problematic perception that teachers who do not look Caucasian or who do not speak with a so-called "standard" accent are often automatically categorized as NNESTs. For instance, Amin (1999) who identified as a native speaker of English, was not recognized as such by many of her colleagues due to her Pakistani accent. It should be noticed that even many native speakers of English do not always speak a national standard variety of

English, depending on geographical location or social status (Kramsch, 1997; Reves & Medgyes, 1994). This highlights how the idealized image of NESTs is often tied to whiteness, physical appearance, and a particular decent accent. In the context of South Korea, Jenks (2017) found that job advertisements frequently specify a preference for White NESTs from specific Anglophone countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom.

2.2 Research on the NESTs and NNESTs divide

Defining NESTs and NNESTs is challenging, but researchers acknowledge the distinctions between them. According to Medgyes (1992), a non-native speaker cannot fully attain a native speaker's level of competence, suggesting that NESTs and NNESTs are two different species. Medgyes (1992) proposed four hypotheses regarding the differences between NESTs and NNESTs. First, NESTs and NNESTs differ in terms of language proficiency. Second, they also exhibit differences in teaching behaviours. Third, these differences in teaching behaviours are attributed to variations in language proficiency. Finally, Medgyes argued that both NESTs and NNESTs can be equally good teachers in their unique ways.

Based on the assumption that NNESTs and NESTs use English differently and, as a result, adopt different teaching approaches, extensive research has been conducted to explore these differences from the perspective of students and teachers. For example, researchers have also summarize the strengths of NNESTs, which are: 1) They provide a good learner model to their students; 2) They can teach language strategies very effectively; 3) They are able to provide more information about the language to their students; 4) They understand the difficulties and needs of the students; 5) They are able to anticipate and predict language difficulties; and 6) In EFL settings, they can use the students' native language to their advantage (Moussu & Llurda, 2008, p.322)

2.2.1 Student Perspectives

Several studies have explored student perceptions of the differences between NESTs and NNESTs. In Hong Kong, Ma (2012a) found that secondary students perceive several benefits

of NNESTs, including their proficiency in the students' L1, their understanding of students' learning challenges, and the sense of ease students experience in both teaching and communication. However, NNESTs were criticized for their traditional, textbook-bound teaching approaches and the lack of opportunities to practice English. Conversely, the perceived advantages of NESTs include their strong English proficiency, ability to facilitate students' learning, and 'not-textbook bound' and 'relaxing' teaching style. Nonetheless, some students reported experiencing anxiety when attending lessons with NESTs and, in certain cases, preferred exam-oriented teaching approaches. Similar findings have been reported among undergraduate university students in Hong Kong, who tend to appreciate NESTs for their language proficiency and cultural knowledge, while valuing NNESTs for their empathy, shared cultural background, and higher expectations for academic performance (Ling & Braine, 2007).

2.2.2 Teacher Perspectives

Research has also explored how NNESTs perceive the differences between themselves and NESTs. In Ma's (2012b) study, 53 secondary NNESTs in Hong Kong were asked through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to examine their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of both NESTs and NNESTs. The findings indicate that participants appreciated NESTs for their language proficiency and better accents but held negative views regarding their limited understanding of students' learning needs and challenges. As NNESTs, they perceived themselves as more familiar with students, including their needs, difficulties, experiences as ESL learners, and the local education and examination system. Additionally, sharing the same first language (L1) is seen as a significant advantage. However, NNESTs were criticized for their lower English proficiency, lack of confidence in using the language, limited ability to motivate students, non-native accent and insufficient knowledge of English-speaking countries (ESCs).

The division between NESTs and NNESTs has also been analysed in terms of actual teaching behaviours. For instance, Reves and Medgyes (1994) observed five NESTs and NNESTs in Hungarian secondary schools. The data found that NNESTs spoke English fluently, used communicative activities and frequently relied on coursebooks. NESTs, on the other hand,

were praised for their effective communication with students, provision of rich cultural information, thorough lesson preparation, and the creation of a relaxed learning environment. However, Ma (2016), in a later observational study conducted in Hong Kong, China, concluded that “differences in the teaching behaviour of NNESTs and NEST were not clear cut” (p.209). Her study focused on classroom atmosphere, exam preparation, exam-oriented teaching, and classroom activities. The results argued that variations in teaching behaviours may not depend on teachers’ linguistic background but are influenced more by personal and contextual factors. These factors include individual teaching preferences, prior learning experiences, professional preparations, educational philosophies, and institutional factors.

2.3 Pedagogical and Professional Implications

There are different practices influenced by the dichotomy between NESTs and NNESTs. For example, to maximize the strength of both NESTs and NNESTs, the co-teaching program, which pairs NESTs and NNESTs, has become quite common in East Asia. The examples include the Native-speaking English Teacher (NET) Scheme in Hong Kong, China, the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, the English Program in Korea (EPIK), and the Foreign English Teacher Recruitment Project (FETRP) in Taiwan, China (Kim & Moodie, 2023). According to Murphy and Scantlebury (2010), effective co-teaching involves teachers collaboratively engaging in all stages of instruction, including planning, teaching, and evaluating lessons together as equal partners. It emphasises that teachers should work “together, sharing responsibility for meeting the learning needs of students and, at the same time, learning from each” (Murphy & Scantlebury, 2010, p.1)

In practice, pedagogical recommendations have also been proposed based on the observed differences between NESTs and NNESTs. Many educational institutions around the world tend to assign reading and grammar instruction to NNESTs, while NESTs are often responsible for teaching speaking, listening, and writing skills. It is recommended that NESTs develop a deeper understanding of their students’ cultural backgrounds. Similarly, NNESTs are encouraged to adopt more interactive and communicative teaching approaches to enhance student

engagement. It is believed that collaboration between NESTs and NNESTs is essential, as their complementary strengths can contribute to more effective language instruction.

4. Critiques of the NEST–NNEST Binary

4.1 Native Speaker Fallacy and Native-Speakerism

The dichotomy between NESTs and NNESTs has long shaped perceptions within the field of ELT. While such comparisons may highlight certain advantages of NNESTs, it has been challenged by many researchers since “its utilization can have negative effects, potentially belittling and alienating NNESTs and perpetuating a false native speaker standard” (Deng, 2024). On one hand, it leads to native-speakerism, an ideology that idealizes NESTs as superior language models. On the other hand, it contributes to the marginalization and even self-marginalization of NNESTs within professional and pedagogical contexts.

4.1.1 Native speaker fallacy

The classification of teachers as NESTs and NNESTs is often based on birthplace and first language acquisition. However, this categorization assumes that being a native speaker naturally qualifies someone to be a better language model and teacher. Phillipson (1992) referred to this prevalent assumption as the native speaker fallacy. Being a native speaker of English does not mean more possibilities of being a good English educator. For example, Bunce (2016) shows how inexperienced and unqualified gap-year NESTs lack sensitivity to local cultures and have an inflated sense of their importance in the classroom.

Besides, the concept of the native speaker is so elusive that it often leads to overgeneralization (Moussu & Llurda, 2008). It is risky to position teachers into any single group without reconsidering diversity among them (Park, 2012). As Moussu and Llurda (2008) argue “we cannot generalise, and there is a need to deepen our knowledge of language teaching and how different factors among individual teachers may affect their performance” (p.328). Furthermore, Kramsch (1997) argue that the concept of a native speaker is an imaginary

construct, as the idea of a linguistically perfect community that makes no errors simply does not exist. In short, it is invalid to use a native speaker as a benchmark for teaching competence.

Building on this, Holliday (2005) introduced the concept of native-speakerism, which refers to “a pervasive ideology within ELT, characterised by the belief that ‘native English-speaking teachers’ represent a ‘Western culture’ from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology” (p.49). Native speakerism believes that NESTs are the best models of the target language and, by extension, the best language teachers (Llurda & Calvet-Terré, 2024). This view promotes the belief that one should learn English from native speakers of English and that the ultimate goal of English learning is to achieve native-like English proficiency, particularly in fluency and pronunciation (Lee & Chan, 2023; Whitehead & Ryu, 2023). These misconceptions suggest that NESTs possess exclusive ownership of the English language and default experience in language education (Canagarajah, 1999).

As a result, this binary classification often places NESTs in a privileged position and NNESTs in a disadvantaged position. Many NNESTs experience unequal and unethical treatment and discrimination in hiring practices and workplace environments (Selvi, 2011). NESTs frequently receive higher salaries and more favourable working conditions compared to NNESTs with the same qualification and academic degree (Widodo et al., 2020). In one Korean University, it is reported that teachers’ legitimacy to teach English seems to be determined by skin colour, nationality, ethnicity, and accent rather than by qualifications, teaching experience, or subject knowledge (Lee & Chan, 2023).

4.1.2 Marginalization and self-marginalization of NNESTs

From the perspective of NNESTs, dividing NESTs and NNESTs in accordance with language competence could also lead to marginalization and self-marginalization for NNESTs (Yang & Forbes, 2025). In the dichotomy between NESTs and NNESTs, NNESTs are often placed in a binary and antagonistic relationship with NESTs, in which the NNEST’s linguistic, cultural and

pedagogical abilities are defined by their native counterparts. NNESTs are considered as 'others' to their native counterparts (Rose et al., 2020). As a result, many NNESTs are being positioned as linguistically and pedagogically less competent than NESTs, even though they have an advanced level of English and teaching qualification (Lim & Park, 2024). In Korea, it is reported that NNESTs depreciate their teaching competence despite having gone through rigorous teaching training programs and competitive teacher certification examinations (Chung & Choi, 2016).

Taking the above-mentioned NET scheme in Hong Kong, China as an example, the division between NESTs and NNESTs can reinforce perceptions of NNESTs as inferior and less competent. The NET scheme intends to emphasize the complementary strengths of NESTs and NNESTs and the value of co-teaching in Hong Kong. However, this division also implies complementary weakness (Benson, 2012). NNESTs may perceive that the employment of NESTs casts doubt on their teaching abilities (Jeon & Lee, 2006). Besides, the official description of the NET Scheme reinforces this perception by implying that NESTs play a superior role in the local education system because NESTs are expected to support NNESTs by developing innovative pedagogical methods, instructional materials, curricula, and activities tailored to the specific needs of local students. Additionally, NESTs are privileged to disseminate effective practices in language teaching and learning through regionally based professional development programmes (Benson, 2012). The preference for NESTs is closely linked to the promotion of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which is widely regarded as the most appropriate approach for developing students' communicative competence. However, CLT is rooted in Western pedagogical traditions and widely promoted by Western cultures. As a result, the teaching methodologies of NNESTs, which are shaped by local contexts and needs, are often undermined

The stereotypical distribution of duties and workload can also lead to tensions between NESTs and NNESTs. The high standard of the above-mentioned co-teaching program has rarely been met (Kim & Moodie, 2023). In practice, NESTs often have lighter workloads and are typically assigned roles that emphasize improving students' speaking skills and offering cultural insights.

In contrast, NNESTs are frequently perceived as limited to exam preparation responsibilities (Trent, 2016). Additionally, NNESTs are often expected to provide support in administrative tasks, effectively serving in subordinate roles to NESTs in the co-teaching programs. However, this division leads to “decontextualized generalizations about what and how a teacher can/cannot, should/should not be and behave” (Selvi et al., 2024, p.13). To some extent, collaborative practice between NESTs and NNESTs can also lead to (re)production of the symbolic boundaries (Wright, 2022).

4.2 Challenging the NEST–NNEST Division

In light of the growing critique of native-speakerism, the binary division between native NESTs and NNESTs requires critical reevaluation. Deconstructing this entrenched ideology is a complex and ongoing process (Trent, 2016; Yang & Forbes, 2025). The recent research on Global Englishes (GE) and language teacher identity (LTI) can be analysed as key frameworks.

4.2.1 Development of Global Englishes

At present, researchers have increasingly questioned the validity of the labels of NESTs and NNESTs with the development of Global Englishes (GE), English as an International Language (EIL), and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (Widodo et al., 2020). It is believed that non-native English speakers are likely to have the chance to speak with other non-native English speakers rather than native English speakers (Matsuda, 2019). The proposal of GE aims to promote linguistic diversity from a multilingual perspective. Therefore, the monolingual practice of ELT, which intends to prioritize NESTs, should be critically challenged from a multilingual perspective to legitimate and empower NNESTs (Prabjandee & Fang, 2022). The goal of English learning should not be the attainment of native-like speech or the pursuit of so-called "standard" English. As Jenkins (2011) argues that achieving a native-like accent is not necessary, particularly in contexts where English functions as a lingua franca. Instead, the emphasis should be on intelligibility when ELF users communicate in English beyond the classroom. Besides, within the framework of GE, the target culture in ELT should also be

challenged because it should not be assumed to be as culture of a specific country (McKay, 2002).

Research within the GE framework highlights the need to change the traditional curriculum to “reflect how the language is actually used today and to promote a more flexible view of language that re-positions the target interlocutor, nurtures language creativity and learner agency, acknowledges that multilingualism is the norm, and ultimately emancipates “non-native speakers” from idealized “native-speaker” norms (Galloway & Rose, 2021, p.12). Besides, outdated and fixed assessment of learners’ proficiency and competence should also be revisited.

However, the proposal of GE has not been widely used in practice. It suggests that GE should be integrated into both preservice and in-service teacher education programs. In these practices, teachers can enhance their critical awareness of challenging monolingual policy represented in the current language textbooks and curricula (Prabjandee & Fang, 2022; Widodo et al., 2020). For NNESTs, pedagogical practices which emphasize the nature of GE should be recommended. For example, learners should be given greater exposure to the diversity of English. Teachers can choose appropriate cultural material and activities to increase students’ political awareness of GE (Matsuda, 2019).

4.2.2 The Role of Identity in Empowering NNESTs

To move beyond the binary division between NESTs and NNESTs, it is crucial to shift the focus away from merely highlighting their differences. Overemphasizing such distinctions risks reinforcing native-speakerism, which may lead to the marginalization and self-marginalization of NNESTs and limit their agency in constructing identities as legitimate and competent English educators. As Trent (2016) asserts, “what is required is situated empirical research that affords a contextualized understanding and interrogation of the discourses that make available and/or deny certain professional identities to all teachers” (pp. 306-307). In this regard, the concept of language teacher identity (LTI), which is crucial for teacher professional development, offers

a valuable lens through which to deconstruct native-speaker ideologies and address issues related to the marginalization of NNESTs (Yang & Forbes, 2025).

Identity can be defined as “the way we make sense of ourselves and the image of ourselves that we present to others” (Day, 2011, p. 48). Specifically, LTI refers to language teachers’ professional and linguistic self-perceptions through their ongoing ‘social interaction’ with teachers, language learners, teacher educators, and administrators, and ‘material interaction’ with educational materials in professional scenarios (Barkhuizen, 2017, p.4). Varghese et al. (2005) suggest that LTI is a multiple, shifting and conflicting concept which is shaped by social and cultural context. Importantly, agency plays a central role in the construction of NNESTs’ professional identities. Based on these understandings, a growing body of research has explored the lived experiences of NNESTs and how they construct and negotiate their LTI. For example, through the lens of identity, Seo (2024) reports that NNESTs who have never studied abroad may feel inferior to peers with international experience. However, by examining the teachers’ self-perception and negotiation of their professional identity, we can better understand how they navigate and overcome these feelings of inadequacy. When teaching a group of high-achieving students, many of whom had lived in English-speaking countries, the lens of identity can offer a valuable perspective on how NNESTs assert their legitimacy and navigate complex classroom dynamics.

More recently, scholars have adopted a poststructuralist approach to (re)investigating and (re)conceptualizing NNESTs’ LTIs within the context of native-speakerism. The poststructuralist perspective not only considers LTI as socially and historically constructed but also as inscribed with power (Foucault, 1980). This framework shifts the focus beyond the traditional link between native-speaker ideologies and linguistic features, toward the complex and dynamic intersections of sociopolitical dimensions such as race, citizenship, and class (Yang & Forbes, 2025). Through this lens of LTI, NNESTs can actively reject the incompetent and inferior labels that are attached to them. For example, Park (2012) provides a compelling example of how NNESTs can transform their professional identities and challenge the deficit perspectives rooted in native-speakerism. Through the case of Xia, a Chinese woman enrolled

in a U.S. TESOL program, Park (2012) illustrates the powerful role identity negotiation plays in overcoming perceived comparative deficits in English competence and helping NNESTs reclaim their legitimacy as English teachers. Through her coursework and particularly her mentored teaching experience, she began to question the native-speaker ideology and embrace her identity as a bilingual professional. This transformation was not just personal but deeply political, as Xia came to understand her position within broader sociopolitical discourses of power, race, and legitimacy in English language teaching.

Teacher education programs play a pivotal role in empowering student teachers to construct and strengthen their professional identities (Wolff & De Costa, 2017; Yang & Forbes, 2025). In this context, identity-based intervention models have been introduced in pre-service teacher education to enhance awareness of the relationship between LTI and native-speaker ideologies (Yang & Forbes, 2025). The intervention focuses on reflection, past professional experience and current positioning as NNESTs. As a result, teacher educators can support NNESTs to develop confidence in their professional strengths in ELT and construct their professional identities against the backdrop of native speakerism.

Challenging native-speakerism, therefore, involves actively constructing and reconstructing LTI for NNESTs (Lim & Park, 2024; Park, 2012; Varghese et al., 2005; Wolff & De Costa, 2017). NNESTs must understand the fluidity and complexity of the relationship of privilege and marginalization and negotiate and renegotiate their LTI in a globalized world where English serve as an international language (Trent, 2016). Moreover, NNESTs should be encouraged to conduct academic research on disseminating the lived experience of NNESTs in various educational contexts and have their voice heard by international audiences (Selvi et al., 2024; Widodo et al., 2020). In short, the research on LTI of NNEST can help better understand NNESTs as legitimate English educators, and more research should be conducted to empower NNESTs.

5. Conclusion

In recent years, an increasing number of scholars have recognised that the racialised ideology underlying native speakerism is deeply problematic since it reinforces political, social and economic barriers, leading to the experience of discrimination and marginalization of NNESTs (Colmenero & Lasagabaster, 2024; Lim & Park, 2024; Moussu, 2018). Nevertheless, the terms ‘native speaker’ and ‘non-native speaker’ remain widely used in real-world contexts when it comes to categorizing the level of language competence of any individual (Ma, 2012a; Whitehead & Ryu, 2023). The continued privileging of native speaker identities is further complicated by the influence of neoliberal ideologies in education (Lee & Chan, 2023).

For NNESTs, it is necessary not only to reflect on how to improve English language competence but also to be a qualified and effective English teacher (Trent, 2016). Importantly, frameworks such as Global Englishes (GE) and language teacher identity (LTI) offer valuable lenses for critically examining and challenging the binary division between NESTs and NNESTs (Park, 2012; Prabjandee & Fang, 2022; Seo, 2024; Trent, 2016; Widodo et al., 2020; Wolff & De Costa, 2017). Moreover, different stakeholders, including the government, policymakers, publishing houses, and teachers, should work actively in challenging the ideology of native speakerism and promoting a more equitable and inclusive vision of English language teaching (Llurda & Calvet-Terré, 2024; Selvi et al., 2024).

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