The Perceptions of Chinese ELT Stakeholders on the Employment of Foreign English Language Teachers

LIU Jun-shuan
Pingdingshan University, Pingdingshan, Henan, China

This article reports on part of the findings of an investigation into the perceptions of Chinese English as a foreign language (EFL) education stakeholders on native-speakerism. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with 26 students, 14 teachers and eight EFL program administrators from six Chinese universities. The analysis of data reveals that the three groups of participants as an entirety expected their universities to hire native English speaker teachers (NESTs), particularly those from Britain and/or America and a certain proportion of them expressed preference for white native English speaker (NES) teachers. The vast majority of the students and teachers were also found to be unaware of workplace inequalities between NNESTs and local Chinese EFL teachers, contending that NESTs deserve better treatment. Although many administrators displayed critical awareness on this issue, they argued that the inequalities need tolerating for the well-being of their EFL programs. All these findings are indicative of the persistence of native-speakerism among Chinese ELT stakeholders and by extension the tenacity of this chauvinistic ideology across the terrain of EFL education in China.

Keywords: native-speakerism, perceptions, Chinese ELT stakeholders, the hiring of foreign English language teachers, workplace inequalities

Introduction

Native-speakerism as a chauvinistic ideology has long been observed predominant in global English language teaching (henceforth ELT), with NESTs perceived as the best English language teachers based on the conception that they “represent a ‘Western culture’ from which springs the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology” (Holliday, 2005, p. 6). This is particularly true of English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL) education in Expanding Circle countries (Kachru, 1985).

Notwithstanding the predominance of native-speakerism in ELT, it has been challenged in the past few decades by the scholarship on the glocalization of the English language, such as World Englishes (WEs) (e.g., Seargeant, 2012), English as a lingua franca (ELF) (e.g., Seidlhofer, 2011) and English as an international language (EIL) (e.g., Matsuda, 2012). Added to the resisting force are the scholarly and institutional efforts made by Nonnative English Speaker Teachers (NNESTs) Movement (see Mahboob, 2010) “to create a nondiscriminatory professional environment for all TESOL members regardless of native language and place of birth” (Braine, 2010, p. 4). Despite all these efforts, native-speakerism continues to serves as the “bedrock of
transnational ELT” (Leung, 2005, p. 128), allowing its culturist, ethnocentric and (neo)racist assumptions as well as the concomitant (self-)discriminatory practices to be further legitimatized (Liu & Li, 2019; Rudolph, et al., 2015). For instance, NESTs, inter alia, white native speakers (NSs) of English from Britain and/or America are still prioritized in the hiring of foreign English language teachers (Doan, 2016; Mahboob & Golden, 2013; Ruecker & Ives, 2015) and continue to enjoy higher payment and greater respect at workplaces than their nonnative counterparts (González & Llurda, 2016; Jenks, 2019; Methitham, 2012). Although these findings derive from studies in different Expanding Circle countries, little is known about the status quo of native-speakerism in mainland China (henceforth China), where EFL education was entrenched in a strong pro-nativeness paradigm in history (Gong & Holliday, 2013). In addition, China has currently the largest body of English language learners in the world and will determine to a great degree the development of the English language as well as the ecology of global ELT (He, 2015; Liu & Li, 2019). In order to fill this lacuna, a study was conducted to explore the perceptions of three groups of Chinese ELT stakeholders—students, teachers and EFL program administrators (henceforth administrators)—on native-speakerism. This article intends to report on part of the findings of this study, with a focus on the viewpoints of these Chinese ELT stakeholders on issues to do with the employment of foreign English language teachers in China. Specifically, it aims to provide answers to the two questions presented as follows.

(1) What types of foreign English language teachers are expected to be hired by Chinese EFL education stakeholders, and how do the stakeholders justify their positions?

(2) In what way do the stakeholders perceive workplace inequalities between NESTs and local Chinese EFL teachers?

**Participants and Instruments**

Data related to this article were collected through semi-structured interviews with 26 students and 14 teachers and eight administrators, who were engaged in College English education—an English language program for non-English-major undergraduate students in China—at six universities when this study was conducted. According to annual national university rankings in the past few years, it can be said that the six universities represent to a great degree many Chinese universities of different academic levels. Moreover, the universities are located in different parts of China and differ in disciplinary background. In addition, the students come from four disciplinary areas, i.e., science, engineering, teacher education and economics; the teachers and administrators vary in respect of professional title, academic degree, age and length of work. All these factors contribute to the representativeness of the participants.

Three sets of interview questions were designed to investigate the perceptions of the three groups of participants on different aspects of native-speakerism. Each set consists of about ten questions, similar in content but different in wording. Within each question set, three or four items are targeted at exploring the mentality of each participant group on the recruitment of foreign English language teachers in China as well as their awareness of workplace inequalities between NESTs and local Chinese EFL teachers. Each interview lasted about one hour, conducted individually via face-to-face conversation and/or email exchange at the convenience of the participants. Presented in the following section are the findings pertinent to the two afore-stated research questions.
Findings

(1) NESTs as the ideal teachers to hire

First language (L1) status and nation base have been taken as two core parameters in ELT job market, as they are usually regarded as the symbol of the genuine or intelligible English language. In this study, the vast majority of the interviewees also hold on to these two criteria. Specifically, 22 (84.6%) of the 26 students, 11 (78.6%) of the 14 teachers and all of the eight administrators stated that they expected their universities to recruit NSs from Inner Circle countries, particularly Britain and America. In the words of Administrator-5,

First of all, in terms of hiring foreign [English language] teachers, and firstly, English should be their native language. Not all foreigners with brown hair and blue eyes are acceptable. Right, English should be their native language. When we submit to the university our requirements for foreign teachers, [we make it clear that] the first ideal choice is those from Britain or America. The second choice is those from Australia, New Zealand and Canada. At the same time, English must be their native language. Normally we don’t hire foreign English teachers from South East Asia, Africa or other areas. (Administrator-5; Emphasis added)

In this comment, Administrator-5 argued repeatedly “English should be their native language”. As with other interviewees, s/he prioritized NESTs from Britain and America, placing NESTs from other Inner Circle countries, such as Australia or Canada, into a secondary position. Moreover, s/he refused to acknowledge the native speaker (NS) status of Outer Circle English speakers, despite the indigenization of the English language there. For him or her, only those from Britain and America are genuine NSs. This stance manifests in the hiring practice of his/her university, which rejects the applicants “from South East Asia, Africa or other areas”.

Although other interviewees admitted the legitimate status of Outer Circle English, they claimed that it has low intelligibility and therefore Outer Circle English language teachers are restrained in professional competence. According to them, NS status can make a qualified teacher (see Phillipson, 1992, p. 185). Nevertheless, whether a language variety is intelligible or not depends mostly on the extent to which listeners are familiarized with it (Smith, 1992). Following this argument, it is not the assumed deficits of Outer Circle English but the insufficient exposure to it that results in comprehension problems. Some others proposed more requirements for prospective Outer Circle applicants in respect of professional qualification. As Teacher-7 stated, “an applicant from a country like India could be accepted if he/she had teacher certificate and rich teaching experiences”. It is obvious that s/he adopted double standards. This is in actuality a common practice, namely, teaching credentials are required of Outer Circle applicants whereas no such demand is raised for those from Inner Circle countries (Braine, 2010).

In addition to L1 status and nation base, the three groups of interviewees expressed their opinions on ethnical backgrounds of prospective applicants. 18 (69.2%) of the 26 students and 71.4% of the 14 teachers asserted that they had no racial preference as long as foreign English language teachers come from Inner Circle countries and have English as their native language. By contrast, more than half of the administrators as well as other teachers and students insisted that White Anglo-Americans should be hired, arguing that that native English speaking Caucasians are better educated than their colored counterparts. This racist stance can be exemplified by the following comment.

In terms of English language teaching, I am inclined to [support] the White from Britain or American. I think they are well educated, and their English is pure and their thoughts are rigorous. Currently, some of my friends ask me to look
for some foreign teachers to provide tutorials for their children. Their requirement is that the foreign teachers should be the White from Britain or America. (Teacher-12; Emphasis added)

Compared with Teacher-12’s modified expressions, such as “I think” or “I am inclined to”, the remarks of the five administrators are much more assertive, for example, “Of course, the White is the ideal” (Administrator-7) or “Definitely, [we should hire] the White who were born, grew up and received education in Inner Circle countries” (Administrator-1). From this “of course” or “Definitely” stance, it can be concluded that these administrators are more inclined to accept the Whiteness as property ideology (Harris, 1993, as cited in Ruecker & Ives, 2015).

Most of the participants in support of the Whiteness principle also claimed that White NESTs look like real NSs. This may explain why they rejected overseas Chinese, even those who have stayed in Inner Circle countries for many years. As Administrator-5 put it in an assertive manner,

Even for the Chinese who have stayed in Britain or America for many years, even if they hold higher academic degree or higher academic status, they do not look like Caucasians … we do not advocate hiring those of other colors except the White. (Administrator-5; Emphasis added)

This statement reverberates in the actual practices of hiring foreign English language teachers in China. Chinese Americans, though having English as their L1 and rich ELT experiences are usually rejected for reasons similar to that stated by Administrator-5, namely, “We don’t advocate hiring those of other colors except the White”.

(2) NESTs deserving better treatment at workplaces

As regards the conventional workplace inequalities between NESTs and local Chinese EFL teachers, the analysis of the data indicates a prevalent “misrecognition” (Bourdieu, 1984) and a tolerance of the inequalities on the part of the three participant groups. Specifically, 69.2% (18) of the 26 students and 64.3% (9) of the 14 teachers considered it normal to offer higher payment and more respects to NESTs. Although the eight administrators all noticed the inequalities, 62.5% (5) considered them not severe and therefore tolerable.

A reason shared by 13 (72.2%) of the 18 students resonates with the morality of “hospitality” that has been advocated and honored in traditional Chinese culture. Some students resorted to the “supply and demand” principle at commercial markets, asserting that NESTs are scarcely supplied in China and thus deserve better treatment. These two reasons—the embodiment of legitimation through morality and rationality (see van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999)—are observable simultaneously from the responses of other students. For instance,

I don’t think this is a discrimination against Chinese EFL teachers. When NESTs come to teach English in China, they should be regarded as friends coming from faraway places and we should treat them warmly and considerately. Such practice can be said to represent the image of our country… Furthermore, not many foreign teachers are available in China, as evidenced from the limited quantity of foreign teachers at my university… (Student-19)

Of the nine teachers who denied workplace discrimination against local Chinese EFL teachers, three also resorted to the “supply and demand” logic, contending metaphorically, “when the fruit is scarcest, its taste is sweetest” (Teacher-3); three asserted that NESTs are superior in professional competence due to English as their L1 and able to provide guidance for ELT reforms in China. In addition to these arguments, the other three argued
that higher payment is appropriate if the income standard of NESTs in their home countries is taken into account. As Teacher-10 asserted,

I don’t think this is a discrimination against Chinese EFL teachers. When universities hire foreign teachers, the teachers are normally what are needed in some disciplines or specializations. This is an active measure taken by universities to attract foreign teachers and promote teaching reforms. Moreover, quite a large proportion of teachers come from developed countries. They may not want to come to China to teach [English] if paid according to [the payment criteria for] Chinese EFL teachers holding the same professional rank as they do. (TI-10; Emphasis added)

In comparison with the reasons provided by most of the students and teachers, the opinions of the eight administrators on this issue are more complicated. 62.5% (5) of the eight administrators acknowledged the inequality in payment. However, they deemed it tolerable, asserting that the gap in payment is not as wide as before due to the increase in remuneration for Chinese EFL teachers in recent years. For instance,

In terms of the current situation, I think there is no big or obvious difference [in payment] … I think the income or payment of NESTs has not made big progress in the past few years. In contrast, the payment of our domestic teachers [Chinese EFL teachers] has definitely made bigger progress. So I think the difference is not so big now and acceptable. (Administrator-8; Emphasis added)

Implied in the “I think” remarks of Administrator-8 is that the gap in remuneration still exists, though it may not be as wide as before. Moreover, s/he and other administrators claimed that the gap would not cause psychological uneasiness among local Chinese EFL teachers. In the words of Administrator-3, “there is an agreement in our heart, that is, this unequal payment… is acceptable”.

While the five administrators acknowledged the discrimination against Chinese EFL teachers in respect of payment, they did not consider granting greater respect to NESTs at workplaces a symptom of self-degradation or self-discrimination. Although the three others acknowledged the (self-)discriminatory nature of such practice, they insisted that it should be tolerated in order to renew the work contract with the present NESTs or attract more NESTs to their universities because the presence of NESTs would help them to “recruit more students” (Administrator-3) and then “make more profits” (Administrator-6). In addition, they believed that the inequality would disappear gradually with the “the economic and social development of China and the related increasingly objective views about NESTs” (Administrator-2). Implied in this perspective is that Chinese EFL teachers need to tolerate this workplace unfairness at least for the time being. This sense of tolerance as well as the unawareness of the inequalities among most of the participants may further naturalize workplace inequalities between NESTs and local Chinese EFL teachers.

Discussion

Findings presented in the preceding section indicate a pro-nativeness ideology prevailing among the three groups of participants, i.e., students, teachers and administrators. With regard to the hiring of foreign English language teachers, most of the participants expressed a strong preference for NESTs, particularly those from Britain or America. For them, Inner Circle English, inter alia, Anglo-American English is more standard and intelligible than Outer and Expanding Circle English. Notably, the majority of the students and teachers displayed no special favor for NESTs from certain racial or ethnical backgrounds. By contrast, more than half of
the administrators granted explicit endorsement for White NESTs, contending that Whites are better educated and look more like a NS.

As for the phenomenon that NESTs usually enjoy higher payment and collect greater respect in workplaces, most of the students and teachers stated that it entails no discrimination against local Chinese EFL teachers, asserting that NESTs deserve such treatment due to their superb professional competence, their scarcity at ELT job market and the tradition of “hospitality” in China. Although the majority of the administrators acknowledged the inequalities, they maintained that the unequal treatment is not severe and needs tolerating for the well-being of their EFL programs.

The findings presented above are aligned with the results of a large number of studies conducted in other ELT contexts (see Introduction), indicating the vibrancy of native-speakerism in global ELT. Since native-speakerism is context specific (Holliday, 2005, p. 8), contextual factors surrounding EFL education in China must be taken into account in order to gain an in-depth insight into the pro-nativeness ethos there. Out of those factors, the predominance of the NS construct in global ELT, the historical-present power imparity between Inner Circle countries and China as well as the governance of EFL education executed by Chinese government seems to account most for this ethos.

According to Kramsch (1997), the NS construct has a historical validity, though it is “created [and sustained] by those who would like to accept the distinction between native speakers and nonnative speakers” (ibid., p. 363). It was in fact invented alongside the emergence of modern European nation states in the 18th and 19th century and further developed through European colonization (Aneja, 2016; Flores, 2013). In the meantime, it has been constantly legitimized by a plethora of expert discourses in Western academia, such as the Chomskyan linguistic competence (Chomsky, 1965), Interlanguage theory (Selinker, 1972) as well as Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research agendas featured with what Bley-Vroman (1983) called “comparative fallacy”. Due to the historical-present hegemony of the English speaking West, the NS construct has been accepted almost indiscriminately by global ELT, including EFL education in China, as the theoretical and practical guideline, with its loaded chauvinistic ideology misrecognized as being natural, normal and commonsensical. This may account for why most of the participants in this study uphold NESTs as the proprietor of English and the ideal foreign English language teachers.

The historical-present power imparity between Inner Circle countries and China also lead to China’s voluntary acceptance of the authority of the English speaking West. According to Pan and Seargeant (2012), ELT in China was initiated officially alongside the Self-strengthening Movement launched by Manchu government in the second half of the 19th century with the intention to acquire the scientific knowledge and technologies from the West. This motive has been further strengthened in the past few decades, particularly since China adopted the Open and Reform policy in 1978. In this self-subjugation ethos, it is easy to reproduce and reinforce the native-speakerist ideology.

The national ELT policies in support of NESTs can be regarded as another significant factor that contributes to the reproduction and reinforcement of the “NS fallacy” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 185) among Chinese ELT stakeholders. For instance, foreign English teachers have been constructed discursively as “foreign experts” in many regulations formulated and issued by Chinese government, as stated by Administrator-4 in the interview. The idealization of NESTs from Inner Circle countries is further reproduced by a recent regulation promulgated
in China on the employment of foreign teachers (see SAOFEA, 2015), which provides that foreign English language teachers must be NSs and if not, they must hold at least a Bachelor’s degree or above awarded by Inner Circle educational institutes. Due to the centralized political system in China, its EFL education is governed strictly by government policies (Gong & Holliday, 2013). With the faithful implementation of these policies or regulations, the authority of NESTs is constantly reproduced and reinforced ideologically. This in turn leads to the favorable treatment to NESTs at workplaces, with the native-speakerist ideology, particularly the idealization of NESTs further domesticated. As a corollary, few questions are raised about the obvious inequalities between NESTs and local Chinese EFL teachers. This may account for why most of the students and teachers in this study asserted that it entails no discrimination against Chinese EFL teachers to offer higher payment and greater respect to NESTs. It may also explain in part why most of the administrators maintained that the practices in favor of NESTs need tolerating, though they realized the discriminatory essence of these practices.

**Conclusion**

Based on the findings presented and discussed in this article, it is evident that the three participant groups as a whole succumbed to native-speakerism. From the sociocultural and historical-political perspective, the pro-nativeness mentality of the participants should not be viewed merely as an academic issue. Rather, it is a joint product of the native-speakerist convention of global ELT, the historical-present Sino-Western power imparity and the governance of EFL education executed by Chinese government. Since the three participant groups are engaged in frontline ELT practices, their perceptions on native-speakerism represent to a great degree the ideological ethos of EFL education in China. Notwithstanding the congruity of the three groups of participants in attitude towards the employment of foreign English language teachers, the administrator group differ from the other two groups in that they displayed an explicit racist position, namely, they prefer to hire white NESTs. This is an interesting finding worthy of exploration in future studies.

**References**

Aneja, G. A. (2016). Rethinking nativeness: Toward a dynamic paradigm of (Non)native speaking. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies, 13*(4), 351-379.

Bley-Vroman, R. (1983). The comparative fallacy in interlanguage studies: The case of systematicity. *Language learning, 33*(1), 1-17.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. London: Routledge.

Braine, G. (2010). *Nonnative speaker English teachers: Research, pedagogy and professional growth*. New York: Routledge.

Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Doan, N. B. (2016). To employ or not to employ expatriate non-native speaker teachers: Views from within. *Asian Englishes, 18*(1), 67-79.

Flores, N. (2013). Silencing the subaltern: Nation-state/colonial governmentality and bilingual education in the United States. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies, 10*(4), 263-287.

Gong, Y., & Holliday, A. (2013). Cultures of change: Appropriate cultural content in Chinese school textbooks. In K. Hyland & L. L. C. Wong (Eds.), *Innovation and change in English language education* (pp. 44-57). New York: Routledge.

González, M., & Llurda, E. (2016). Bilingualism and globalisation in Latin America: Fertile ground for native-speakerism. In G. Hall (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of English Language Teaching* (pp. 90-109). New York: Routledge.

He, D. (2015). University students’ and teachers’ perceptions of China English and world Englishes: Language attitudes and pedagogic implications. *The Asian Journal of Applied Linguistics, 2*(2), 65-76.

Holliday, A. (2005). *The struggle to teach English as an international language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jenks, C. (2019). English for sale: Using race to create value in the Korean ELT market. *Applied Linguistics Review, 10*(4), 517-538.
Kachru, B. B. (1985). Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the outer circle. In R. Quirk & H. G. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the world: Teaching and learning the language and literatures* (pp. 11-30). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kramsch, C. (1997). The privilege of the nonnative speaker. *PMLA. Publications of the modern language association of America, 112*(3), 359-369.

Leung, C. (2005). Convivial communication: Recontextualizing communicative competence. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 15*(2), 119-144.

Liu, J., & Li, S. (2019). Native-speakerism in English language education: The current situation in China. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Mahboob, A. (Ed.). (2010). *The NNEST lens: Non native English speakers in TESOL*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Mahboob, A., & Golden, R. (2013). Looking for native speakers of English: Discrimination in English language teaching job advertisements. *Voices in Asia, 3*(18), 72-81.

Matsuda, A. (Ed.). (2012). *Principles and practices of teaching English as an international language. New perspectives on language and education*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Methitham, P. (2012). White prestige ideology and its effects on ELT employment in Thailand. *International Journal of the Humanities, 9*(4), 145-156.

Pan, L., & Seargeant, P. (2012). Is English a threat to Chinese language and culture? *English Today, 28*(03), 60-66.

Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rudolph, N., Selvi, A. F., & Yazan, B. (2015). Conceptualizing and confronting inequity: Approaches within and new directions for the “NNEST movement”. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies, 12*(1), 27-50.

Ruecker, T., & Ives, L. (2015). White native English speakers needed: The rhetorical construction of privilege in online teacher recruitment spaces. *Tesol Quarterly, 49*(4), 733-756.

SAOFEA. (2015). *Waiguo zhuanjia laihua gongzuo fuwu zhinan [Work Permit Service Guidance for Foreign Experts to Work in China]*. Beijing: Chinese National Foreign Expert Bureau.

Seargeant, P. (2012). *Exploring world Englishes: Language in a global context*. New York: Routledge.

Seidhlofer, B. (2011). *Understanding English as a lingua franca*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *IRAL-International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching, 10*(1-4), 209-232.

Smith, L. E. (1992). Spread of English and issues of intelligibility. In B. B. Kachru (Ed.), *The other tongue: English across cultures* (pp. 75-90). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

van Leeuwen, T., & Wodak, R. (1999). Legitimating immigration control: A discourse-historical analysis. *Discourse Studies, 1*(1), 83-118.