



International Journal of
MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION

ISSN: (Print) ISSN 1987-9601

(Online) E ISSN 1512-3146

Journal homepage: <http://multilingualeducation.org/>

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To cite this article: Ana Jovic (2023): Native Speakerism in the Online ELT market. International Journal of Multilingual Education, #24.
DOI: [10.22333/ijme.2023.24007](https://doi.org/10.22333/ijme.2023.24007); pp. 87-93.

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.22333/ijme.2023.24007>

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ABSTRACT

Native speakerism is a language ideology that assumes that the ideals of the English language and English teaching methodology come from American and British cultures. Therefore, their best representatives are native speakers of English from these two cultures. This ideology is deeply rooted in the English language teaching market, where most language school owners advertise vacancies only for native-speaker teachers. They prefer hiring unqualified native speakers of English to qualified and experienced non-native teachers. Non-native teachers experience discrimination based on their country of origin and first language, which means they have fewer employment opportunities and work for lower hourly rates. Such discriminatory practices based on native speakerism affect non-native teachers both professionally and personally. This study suggests possible ways to restore teachers' self-confidence and promote their qualifications and skills so that non-native teachers are not marginalized in the future. This study also presents the results of a case study of non-native English teachers from Serbia, how they perceive native speakerism, and the negative effects experienced by these teachers. The results reveal that this ideology harms the professional and private lives of English teachers from Serbia, which is reflected in their poor professional confidence and low self-esteem. Non-native teachers accept low-paid positions and patronizing treatment from employers to keep their jobs and financial security, thus compromising the teaching positions they deserve as qualified teachers.

Keywords: *discrimination, native speaker, non-native speaker, ELT, language ideology*

Introduction

The online English Language Teaching (ELT)¹ market has seen a rise in demand for online English teachers in the last decade. There have been a significant number of online advertisements, approximately 75%, where employers advertise vacancies only for native-speaker teachers (Kiczkowiak, 2015). Employers openly search for candidates from the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, so they unwillingly interview or hire candidates from the rest of the world. Desirable countries belong to the so-called Inner Circle. The Inner Circle includes countries where English is spoken as the first language and is used as a dominant language, and native speakers from these places are the most desirable in the ELT market (Kachru, 1985).

¹ ELT- English Language Teaching

1.1. Kachru's Concentric Circles

To understand the terminology, its origin, and implications, I will provide a brief background on the term Inner Circle and how it found its place in the narrative about native speakerism. The Inner Circle belongs to Concentric Circles, a term coined by Braj Kachru. This famous linguist labeled countries according to how English is spoken and used worldwide. Concentric Circles include the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle. The Inner Circle countries are those in which English is spoken as the first language and is used as the dominant language. The Outer Circle countries use English as the second and official language. The Expanding Circle are countries where English is learned as a foreign language. Kachru's Concentric Circles explains why teachers from the Outer and Expanding Circles are discriminated against compared with native-speaker teachers from the Inner Circle.

1.2. Native speakerism

The underlying reason for such discrimination is a language ideology known as native speakerism. This ideology perpetuates the idea that native speakers know English better than other speakers; therefore, a native speaker is the best role model for learners of English. Achieving the level of a native speaker has become a learner's goal, so learners of English are more willing to learn English with the help of a native-speaker teacher (Holliday, 2009). Learners believe that a native-speaker teacher guarantees success in learning English because of the first language he speaks and "the right passport" he holds. Non-native teachers are perceived as incompetent despite the relevant qualifications, training, and extensive experience in various teaching contexts. They are judged on the basis of their accents, countries of origin, first languages, and race. With existing prejudices, non-native English teachers hold an unfavorable position in the ELT market.

1.3. Hiring practices in the ELT market

Given the lack of qualified and experienced native-speaker teachers of English as a foreign language, employers decide to hire native-speaker teachers without relevant teaching qualifications so that they can cater to the demands of the ELT market and its consumers. Therefore, native-speaker English teachers are mostly unqualified and untrained for a teaching position. Native-speaker teachers' main advantage over non-native-speaker teachers is their country of origin and their mother tongue, and this privilege makes them the most desirable candidates over teachers who were not fortunate enough to be born in one of the Inner Circle countries, where they could learn English

as a native speaker.

When qualified and trained non-native teachers apply to native-only advertisements, they are often rejected on the grounds of their origin, nationality, and language. Such hiring practices place non-native teachers in an unfavorable position where they face rejection and ignorance. Rejected and ignored, they have few employment opportunities and usually work for low hourly rates. Such circumstances lead to teachers' low professional confidence and lower self-esteem (Kamhi-Stein, 2000).

1.4. Research topic

This study aims to learn more about the negative effects of native speakerism on non-native English teachers working in the online ELT market and how to mitigate them. The study also suggests various actions for empowering non-native teachers so that they can be demarginalized and offered equal opportunities as their native-speaking peers.

There have been various research on the negative effects of native speakerism on non-native English teachers. However, such research did not investigate how native speakerism affects English teachers from the Balkans in southeast Europe. This study also fills the research gap and will be used as a pilot study for doctoral research on native speakerism.

2. Methodology

2.1. Informants

The informants of this study were 15 online English teachers whose native language was Serbian and who were located in Serbia, a country in the Balkans. They all worked for the same online language school at the time of the study. They were also members of an informal online community of teachers working for the aforementioned online school, so they were well-connected and shared similar experiences in the online ELT market, which made them suitable for this study.

2.2. Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of three groups of questions. It was made in Google Forms and administered online. The questionnaire included open-ended questions, dichotomous and Likert scales. The first group of questions was about the informants' general information, such as age, gender, language level, qualifications, professional training, and general teaching experience. The second group of questions aimed at the informants' teaching experience in online language schools, whereas the third group aimed at the informants' experience with and attitude toward native speakers in the ELT market.

2.3. Analysis

The responses were analyzed using a mixed method. Quantitative analysis was used for the first group of responses, in which the informants answered general questions about their age, gender, qualifications, language level, professional training, and general teaching experience. The second group of scaled and open-ended questions was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The third group of questions was analyzed qualitatively because responses to its open-ended questions were suitable for qualitative analysis.

2.4. Hypothesis

Non-native teachers have been reporting many negative effects caused by discriminatory hiring practices in the ELT market. We assume that online non-native teachers from the Balkans also suffer from the negative effects of native speakerism. In addition, we expect teachers to share their online experiences with discriminatory hiring practices, which will support the hypothesis that Serbian teachers are being discriminated against and suffering from the negative impact of this language ideology.

3. Results and Discussion

Two-thirds of the informants did not apply to online advertisements for native-speaker teachers. They believed that they had no right to apply because they were not native speakers. They avoided such advertisements, which meant few employment opportunities and low hourly rates. They felt discriminated against, but they accepted their situation as unchangeable. They came to terms with the fact that they would never have an opportunity to earn more and advance in their online career.

One-third of the informants dared to apply to such advertisements. They did not accept their “non-native fate,” so they continued to apply. Among them, we notice two tendencies. One group of teachers, about 73% of this one-third, applied to online advertisements as non-native speakers, which was their true identity. They were honest about their identity, believing that the employer would recognize their qualifications, skills, experience, and expertise as suitable for the positions they advertised.

The remaining 27% applied and pretended to be native speakers to increase their hiring chances. They pretended to be native speakers in several ways: they claimed to be native speakers and kept their true names, changed their names to sound more English, or created images of false passports in Photoshop to prove their “true origin” from the countries in the Inner Circle.

The acceptance rate for teachers who applied with a false passport was high (93%). This percentage leads to the conclusion that a false passport helps teachers get hired in the online ELT market, which was expected given that the Inner Circle passport holders are the most desirable candidates.

The acceptance rate for teachers who were honest with employers and applied with their true identity was unexpectedly high (60%). This percentage concludes that employers are willing to hire non-native speakers despite publishing advertisements looking for native teachers from the Inner Circle only. However, employers who hired non-native teachers required these teachers to pretend to be native teachers in front of students. Employers planned to market these teachers as natives and thus provide a stable customer base for their schools. All the teachers accepted such a request because they were motivated by financial gain. If they pretended to be native teachers, they would earn at least three times more than what they would earn working for non-native hourly rates.

Working for an online school that requires teachers to assume a false identity has taken its toll on these online teachers. Despite being highly motivated, the teachers who assumed a false identity reported feeling “awkward, embarrassed, and frustrated” because they lied to their students. They feared that their true identity would be revealed, which would have cost them their teaching position and financial stability.

Besides being afraid for their jobs, working for low hourly rates, and having few employment opportunities, teachers also reported several more negative effects of the discriminatory hiring practices and treatment they received at those online schools: no chances for promotion, a feeling of being undervalued, low professional confidence, and low self-esteem.

Even though teachers felt discriminated against during hiring processes when they worked for such online schools, they were unaware that the discrimination they faced was caused by native speakerism, an ideology deeply rooted in the ELT market. A little more than 50% of the informants had never heard of native speakerism before completing the questionnaire. When the informants were asked if they believed something should be done, 86% believed that we have to act immediately, while 73% were skeptical about the results of such actions. They believed that even if we did something about native speakerism, it would be pointless.

4. Conclusion

To help teachers stand up for themselves and their rights in the online ELT market, we should educate them about native speakerism. The more teachers know about this ideology and its background, the better able they will be to overcome the challenges of the current ELT market.

Teacher education on native speakerism can be provided through formal and informal communities, such as teachers' associations and social media. Teachers' associations are formal organizations with the power to spread the word about native speakerism with their large-scale reach. Informal communities, such as online communities on social media and platforms, can provide the necessary support of peers by exchanging information and experiences.

Non-native teachers should continue applying to native-only advertisements because they have a unique opportunity to showcase their skills and expertise, which may bring about a mind shift among employers and other stakeholders in the ELT market.

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