



More than a Native Accent: A Qualitative Inquiry into Non-Native English Teachers' Experiences in the Global TESOL Job Market

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Abstract

Although English is widely recognized as a global language, hiring practices in English Language Teaching (ELT) often continue to privilege native-speaker status. This qualitative study explores how non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) experience and interpret recruitment processes in the global TESOL job market. Data were collected through written questionnaires and follow-up online conversations with 12 NNESTs from Central Asia and Eastern Europe who had applied for teaching positions in countries including South Korea, Saudi Arabia, China, and Spain. The analysis revealed recurring themes related to native-speaker preference, the intersection of language bias with race and appearance, passport-based hiring restrictions, and the emotional impact of repeated rejection. At the same time, participants identified pedagogical strengths associated with their non-native status, such as heightened metalinguistic awareness, empathy toward learners, and the ability to model attainable multilingual competence. The findings point to a persistent gap between contemporary TESOL scholarship and hiring practices and demonstrate the continued relevance of native-speakerism in the post-pandemic TESOL context.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

NNEST, Native-Speakerism, TESOL Hiring, Teacher Identity, Global Englishes

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, discussions of diversity, equity, and inclusion have be-

come increasingly central to English Language Teaching (ELT). English is now widely described as a global language, used by multilingual speakers in a broad range of sociocultural contexts rather than belonging to a single group of so-called native speakers [1] [2]. This reconceptualization has led to renewed attention to questions of teacher legitimacy, identity, and professional authority, particularly for non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs).

Despite these theoretical and pedagogical shifts, employment practices in the global TESOL job market often lag behind academic discourse. In many regions, native-speaker status continues to function as an explicit or implicit requirement in hiring decisions, sometimes overriding formal qualifications, teaching experience, or demonstrated classroom competence [3] [4]. Research conducted in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that while modalities of instruction and recruitment have diversified, particularly through online platforms, native-speaker preference remains a dominant organizing principle in many hiring contexts [5] [6].

This study emerged from my professional interactions with NNESTs who repeatedly described similar barriers when seeking employment abroad. Their accounts raised questions about how contemporary ideologies of English intersect with older assumptions about language ownership, race, authenticity, and employability. By foregrounding teachers' lived experiences, this article aims to explore how NNESTs perceive and navigate international hiring practices and what these experiences reveal about persistent power structures in ELT.

To clearly delineate the scope of the study and guide the discussion that follows, the article addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How do non-native English-speaking teachers describe their experiences of recruitment and selection in the international TESOL job market?
- 2) What forms of linguistic, national, or racialized bias do NNESTs perceive in these hiring processes?
- 3) How do NNESTs articulate the pedagogical value of their professional identities in relation to dominant native-speaker norms?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Native-Speakerism and ELT Hiring Practices

The concept of native-speakerism refers to an ideology that positions native speakers of English as the ideal linguistic authorities and teachers while marginalizing non-native professionals [3].

A substantial body of research has challenged the assumption that native speakers are inherently better teachers. Studies consistently demonstrate that effective teaching is shaped by pedagogical training, reflective practice, and contextual sensitivity rather than nativeness alone [7] [8]. Nevertheless, analyses of job advertisements and recruitment policies indicate that native-speaker status continues to be explicitly or implicitly prioritized in many ELT contexts [4] [6].

Recent reviews of NNEST research confirm that native-speakerism remains a

structurally embedded feature of TESOL hiring rather than a residual or declining phenomenon [5]. These authors argue that nativeness often functions as a symbolic shortcut for quality assurance, particularly in privatized and market-driven ELT sectors.

2.2. Race, Appearance, and Linguistic Legitimacy

Native-speaker bias frequently intersects with race and appearance. Kubota and Lin (2009) argue that English teaching is racialized, with whiteness implicitly associated with linguistic legitimacy and professionalism [9]. Teachers who do not conform to these visual expectations may face additional scrutiny or exclusion, regardless of their linguistic competence or professional qualifications.

More recent studies conducted in Asian and Middle Eastern ELT markets suggest that such racialized expectations persist in the post-pandemic era, even as institutions adopt more flexible teaching modalities [10]. These dynamics complicate the experiences of NNESTs, for whom language background, nationality, and racialized appearance interact in shaping hiring outcomes.

2.3. Global Englishes and NNEST Pedagogical Strengths

From a Global Englishes perspective, English is understood as a shared communicative resource rather than the property of native speakers [1]. Within this framework, NNESTs are recognized as legitimate users and teachers of English who often bring distinctive pedagogical strengths to the classroom.

Research highlights several advantages commonly associated with NNESTs, including explicit knowledge of grammar, heightened metalinguistic awareness, empathy grounded in personal language-learning experience, and the ability to serve as realistic role models for learners [5] [8]. Despite this recognition in scholarship, such strengths are rarely foregrounded in recruitment practices.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design aimed at understanding how non-native English-speaking teachers interpret and make sense of their experiences in the global TESOL job market. A qualitative approach was considered particularly appropriate because issues of discrimination, legitimacy, and professional identity are deeply subjective and context-dependent.

3.2. Participants and Sampling Strategy

The study involved 12 non-native English-speaking teachers from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Russia, and Mongolia. Participants were recruited through professional networks, online teacher communities, and snowball sampling. Inclusion criteria required that participants self-identify as NNESTs and have applied for at least one teaching position outside their home country within the pre-

vious five years.

The sample reflects a specific regional focus on Central Asia and Eastern Europe, regions that remain underrepresented in TESOL hiring research. Participants held internationally recognized teaching qualifications (e.g., CELTA, TEFL, TESOL certificates) and had between two and over ten years of teaching experience in secondary, private, and higher education contexts.

3.3. Data Collection

Data was collected in two stages. First, participants completed written questionnaires distributed via email. Second, follow-up conversations were conducted online via video calls and voice-based messaging platforms such as Zoom and WhatsApp. These conversations were audio-recorded with participants' consent and supplemented by analytic field notes. The follow-ups allowed participants to clarify questionnaire responses and expand on issues such as native-speaker requirements, passport-based restrictions, employer feedback, and emotional responses to rejection.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically using an iterative process of familiarization, coding, and theme development. Questionnaire responses, interview transcripts, and field notes were read multiple times, and preliminary codes were generated manually. These codes were then grouped into broader themes related to hiring criteria, professional identity, emotional impact, and perceived pedagogical value. Themes were refined through constant comparison across cases to ensure they reflected shared patterns rather than isolated experiences.

3.5. Ethical Considerations and Researcher Positionality

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Pseudonyms were used, and identifying details were removed to protect anonymity. The author's professional engagement with NNESTs is acknowledged as a reflexive lens through which the research was conducted.

4. Findings

4.1. Native-Speaker Preference as an Initial Barrier

A consistent theme across participants' accounts was the role of native-speaker status as an initial screening criterion. Approximately half of the participants reported being rejected at the application stage without an interview due to explicit native-speaker requirements.

One participant from Belarus explained:

"I never got an interview. The rejection email simply said they were only considering native speakers, even though my qualifications matched the job requirements." (Figure 1)

Hi Aigul,

Thanks for your interest in this Greenheart Travel program, and teaching in South Korea!

Unfortunately, as outlined on our website, to be eligible for the South Korea program you must be a native English speaker and a citizen of one of the following countries:

United States of America

Canada

United Kingdom

Ireland

New Zealand

Australia

Figure 1. Example of a rejection email citing native-speaker requirements.

4.2. Intersection of Language Bias, Race, and Appearance

Several participants emphasized that hiring decisions were shaped not only by language background but also by racialized and visual expectations.

A teacher from Kazakhstan noted:

“It feels like it’s not only about language, but about what an English teacher is supposed to look like.”

4.3. Passport and Visa-Based Restrictions

Participants frequently referred to passport-based hiring policies that restricted eligibility to citizens of specific countries. These policies were often explained by employers as requirements imposed by immigration authorities. While some participants acknowledged the legal realities underpinning visa regulations, they nevertheless perceived these restrictions as reinforcing existing hierarchies within ELT.

Several teachers noted that job advertisements rarely clarified whether nationality requirements were legally mandated or institutionally preferred. This lack of transparency contributed to frustration and uncertainty, as applicants were often unsure whether submitting an application was worthwhile. From the participants’ perspectives, clearer communication about such requirements could reduce unnecessary emotional and professional strain.

Participants also reported encountering passport-based hiring policies, often justified by visa regulations. From the teachers’ perspectives, these policies were experienced as arbitrary and disconnected from professional ability. While some acknowledged the legal constraints faced by institutions, they expressed frustration at how these restrictions were communicated—or not communicated—during recruitment.

4.4. Pedagogical Strengths Associated with NNEST Identity

In contrast to the barriers they faced, participants articulated clear pedagogical strengths linked to their non-native status (**Figure 2**). Several emphasized their explicit knowledge of grammar and ability to anticipate learner difficulties:

Home Country	Pre-Interview (Native Speaker)	Appearance / Race	Visa / Passport	Total Teachers
Kazakhstan (applied for a job in China and South Korea)	1	2	0	3
Uzbekistan (applied for a job in Saudi Arabia and China)	1	1	0	2
Belarus (applied for a job in Spain and South Korea)	1	0	2	3
Mongolia (applied for a job in China)	0	2	0	2
Russia (applied for a job in Spain and Saudi Arabia)	1	0	1	2

Figure 2. Reported reasons for rejection and countries where participants applied for teaching positions.

“Because I learned English myself, I know exactly where students struggle and how to explain things step by step.”

Others highlighted empathy and role modeling:

“Students trust me because they see that learning English well is possible. I’m proof of that.”

4.5. Emotional and Professional Impact

Beyond practical consequences, repeated rejection had a noticeable emotional impact. Participants described feelings of self-doubt, frustration, and diminished professional confidence, particularly when feedback was absent.

One teacher reflected:

“After a while, you start wondering if your skills actually matter.”

These emotional responses highlight how hiring practices shape not only career trajectories but also teachers’ professional identities.

5. Discussion

5.1. Reconnecting Theory and Practice in Global TESOL Hiring

The findings reveal a persistent misalignment between TESOL scholarship and hiring practices. While Global Englishes and NNEST research emphasize multi-lingual competence and pedagogical expertise, recruitment systems often continue to rely on native-speaker status as a proxy for quality [5] [6].

5.2. Native-Speakerism, Commodification, and Institutional Risk Management

Participants' perceptions of hiring practices can be understood through theoretical frameworks that conceptualize English as a commodified global resource. In market-oriented ELT systems, English teachers function not only as educators but also as symbols of authenticity and value. Hiring a "native speaker" thus operates as a form of institutional risk management, offering reassurance to students, parents, and clients [11].

Post-pandemic research suggests that economic uncertainty has further intensified reliance on such marketable symbols, reinforcing native-speakerism rather than diminishing it [10]. Within this context, NNESTs are positioned as higher-risk hires regardless of qualifications.

5.3. Professional Identity and Internalized Doubt

The emotional consequences reported by participants echo recent NNEST identity research, which documents how repeated exclusion can lead to internalized doubt and diminished professional confidence [12].

5.4. Post-Pandemic Relevance

Although online teaching and transnational mobility have reshaped aspects of TESOL employment, native-speaker bias remains embedded in hiring discourse. The findings therefore remain highly relevant to post-pandemic TESOL debates concerning equity, legitimacy, and professional recognition.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its small sample size and its focus on NNESTs from Central Asia and Eastern Europe. The findings should not be generalized to all NNESTs or ELT contexts. Future research could involve larger-scale comparative studies, employer perspectives, or longitudinal analyses of post-pandemic hiring trends.

7. Conclusion

The experiences of these 12 educators reflect enduring inequities in the global TESOL job market. As English continues to function as a global language, the central issue is no longer NNEST competence, but whether hiring practices are prepared to align with contemporary understandings of language, pedagogy, and professional legitimacy.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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