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Nonnative English Speaking Teachers Who Are Foreign Nationals in South Korea and Japan: A Continuing Struggle for Inclusion

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Abstract

It is widely considered that native English speaking teachers (NESTs) are more suitable to teach nonnative students than nonnative English speaking teachers (NNESTs). When it comes to NNESTs in an EFL setting, most are local nationals (LNNESTs). However, it should be noted that there is also a group of NNESTs who are foreign nationals (FNNESTs). Compared with LNNESTs, FNNESTs have the additional concept of 'foreign', which leads people to think that these teachers may neither show authentic proficiency of English nor understand the native language of the country. Thus, FNNESTs are often considered to be much less suitable to teach nonnative students than LNNESTs. There have been few studies focusing on FNNESTs. In this study, two studies of FNNESTs in Korea and Japan respectively were reviewed and compared. The two countries have almost the same perception about FNNESTs even though there is a slightly different point in the policy toward FNNESTs between the two countries. It was found that NESTs were perceived as the ideal model and FNNESTs were unfairly and/or discriminatively treated in both countries, a situation which could damage their identity as teachers.

Introduction

Native English speaking teachers (NESTs) are generally considered better English teachers for nonnative students than nonnative English speaking teachers (NNESTs). This is because, as Braine (2010), Llurda (2015), and Ruecker and Ives (2015) stated, the globally pervasive native English norms legitimatize native English teachers as the only and absolute model of English instruction and source of learning resources for learners of English as a second or foreign language

Walkinshaw and Oanh (2014) argued that the preference for the native speaker is particularly salient in Asia. As other Asian countries, South Koreans and Japanese are more inclined to prefer teachers from Kachru's (1992) inner circle to ones from the outer and expanding circles.

In an EFL setting like South Korea (hereafter Korea), where English is taught as a 'foreign language' rather than a 'second language', it is common to divide English language teachers into two categories; 'native speakers' and 'non-native speakers who are the local nationals'. This is corroborated in Kudaibegenov and Lee's (2022) study by an informant called Yina from Nicaragua, a pre-service teacher of English staying in Korea. She said,

> *In my country, people don't care if you are a native speaker, but here, if you are a non-Korean English teacher, you must be native. I find it difficult to accept because you don't really have to be native in order to be a good teacher.*

She assumed that for Koreans there is no other option than to think that an English teacher from abroad must be NESTs. In light of this prevaling assumption, it should be noted that there is a hidden category in NNESTs; the NNESTs who are foreign nationals (FNNESTs) in comparison with NNESTs who are local nationals (LNNESTs). While LNNESTs refer to the NNESTs who are native to the country, FNNESTs are the NNESTs who are from abroad. For example, FNNESTs are French, Mexican, or Malaysian teachers of English who are living in Korea.

As mentioned, there is a general perception that NNESTs are less suitable than NESTs. Specifically, FNNESTs have the concept of 'foreign' added to the NNESTs, which leads people to think that the teachers may neither show authentic proficiency of English nor understand the native

language of the country. As a result, people may think FNNESTs are much less suitable than LNNESTs.

To date, only a few research studies have focused specifically on FNNESTs. In this study, a study of three FNNESTs in Korea (Kudaibegenov & Lee, 2022) and a study of eighteen FNNESTs in Japan (Balgoa, 2019) were reviewed and compared. Considering that the situation surrounding English education is similar in Korea and Japan, in that they are monolingual (Korean and Japanese respectively) EFL countries located in the cultural area of Confucianism and have striven for globalization in the last few decades (Yuasa, 2010), this study would be meaningful as a herald of new interest in FNNESTs in EFL countries.

NESTs vs. NNESTs in Korea & Japan

Whether in Korea or Japan, many studies raised the same issue about the inequality between NESTs and NNESTs. Jeon (2010) said English is seen in Korea as the most powerful language, and native English speakers are positioned as superior while non-native teachers of English are positioned as inferior. Studies such as Shibata (2010) and Walkinshaw and Duong (2014) argued that the native speakers in Japan were considered to be the best models and types of language teachers for their nonnative students to aspire to both in terms of linguistic knowledge and pronunciation.

In the meantime, as there has been a global spread of English as an international language and dominance of non-native English speakers throughout the world, the value of NNESTs, specifically LNNESTS, has started to rise. The fact that they share the same native language with their students, and have already experienced the way their students are learning English is also recognized as a great asset to teachers of English.

Korea

It is noted that the nonnative teachers of English who came from abroad, that is FNNESTS, would not be welcomed in Korea as they are considered marginalized due to both of the aspects; the inauthentic proficiency of the students' target language, and the lack of knowledge of the students' native language. Therefore, there is an assumption in Korea that only native speakers from anglophone or inner circle countries can

teach 'genuine' English (Lee, 2011). As a result, the NESTs' schemes have been created to recruit a large number of NESTs from anglophone countries to teach English in local schools (Lee, 2021).

Such discriminatory ideas toward FNNESTs in Korea are clearly shown in the Korean government's E-2 English-teaching visa program (Korvia, 2015). Only citizens of one of the following countries: Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, or South Africa, all inner-circle countries, are eligible to be given a work visa to work as English teachers.

This restriction in turn limited the government-run program: 'English Program in Korea (EPIK)', which placed English native speakers in Korean public schools. EPIK was designed to improve the English-speaking abilities of students and teachers in Korea, to develop cultural exchanges between Korea and abroad, and to introduce new teaching methodologies into the Korean educations system (EPIK, n.d.; Jeon, 2010). EPIK, in accordance with Korean law, only invited citizens of those seven inner-circle countries, which then restricted the contact with English as an international language and potential cultural exchanges that could have happened with a broader pool of potential English teachers.

Japan

In the same manner with Korea, there is a strong belief in Japan that the ideal English teacher is a native speaking one (Wang, 2012; McKenzie, 2013). Some researchers such as Balgona (2019), and Sugimoto and Yamamoto, (2019) stated that the FNNESTs' legitimacy as English teachers in Japan were questioned in the work place by the Japanese teachers (LNNESTs) and their NESTs' colleagues because of their nonnative accent and non-White skin color.

However, there is a slight difference in Japan, compared with Korea. For example, the qualifications of the instructor visa to teach English in schools are to be a native English speaker or to have at least 12 years of schooling in English. While Korea exclusively limits the applicants for such a visa to native speakers from only seven inner circle countries, Japan seems to be more flexible and leave room even for FNNESTs to become English teachers. Furthermore, it is much more flexible in ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) positions of the JET (The Japan Exchange

and Teaching) Program, where it is open to non-native speakers who just have a functional command of the English language (JET, n.d.).

Exploration of FNNESTs in Korea and Japan

FNNESTs in Japan and Korea were explored in Kudaibergenov and Lee (2022) and Balgoa (2019). How they were perceived about themselves and how their identity has been changed were compared between the two countries.

Kudaibergenov and Lee's study

Kudaibergenov and Lee's (2022) study examined professional identity tensions in three international preservice teachers who were enrolled in a graduate school, in Korea, majoring in TESOL. Actually, they had some experiences teaching in their own countries.

All the three informants in Kudaibergenov and Lee's study raised the same concerns about the powerful native speakerism in Korea and its influence on their legitimacy issue. These were represented as the two themes, 'Local beliefs overemphasizing native speakerness' and 'Illegitimacy concern'. They stated that the informants were constantly rejected in the host community and this inevitably led to 'identity tension'.

All the informants felt rejected as an English teacher in Korea due to their non-native background. An informant named Jennet from Turkmenistan kept looking for teaching positions only to realize that she did not qualify. Another informant called Samir from Afghanistan who already had got his Master's degree and five years of lecturer in his country sent more than 50 emails to different academies to teach English but he didn't receive any reply. Yina from Nicaragua, in the same vein, confessed that all of the teaching jobs were only for native speakers and this caused a great deal of frustration.

The teaching visa in Korea is strictly restricted to the citizens from the seven English-speaking countries, and the limitation is assumed to severely affecting the identity of FNNESTs. Kudaibergenov and Lee pointed out that the tension of illegitimacy would be severely impacting the informants since it would emphasize regulatory forces that deny access to teaching despite the informants' relevant qualifications.

Kudaibergenov, one of the authors in Kudaibergenov and Lee's (2022) study candidly described in 2021 his own experiences about the critical moments along his six-year life as an FNNEST from his arrival in the host country to his recent days. It is a salient example of how the identity of an FNNEST was impacted by the issue of illegitimacy. He arrived in Korea as a graduate student of TESOL with full scholarship provided from the Korean government. His undergraduate major was Translation and Interpreting in his native country, Kyrgyzstan. He was talented enough to fluently speak five languages, including English and Korean. Even though he was native-like in speaking English and very effective and confident in teaching English, he shortly recognized the limitations and got entangled in the discourses promoting social and linguistic hierarchies and native speakerism. He was very much disappointed with the policies denying FNNESTs access to teaching. As he was enthusiastic about teaching, he finally started teaching, not officially as a teacher, in an academy where they got around legal restrictions and registered him officially as a technician. Later, this absurdness of the situation reached the point where he was finally asked by the director to say he was from Canada in case someone asked. Definitely this caused him internal struggle every time he answered the question "Where are you from?" for the students and their parents. He must have experienced frustrations when he tried to avoid revealing his true identity.

Balgoa's study

Balgoa (2019) attempted to explore and analyze the motivations of the eighteen Filipino ALTs who migrated and taught English in Japan and how their 'nonnativeness' shaped and reshaped their identity as FNNESTs. Even though the Philippines is recognized globally as one of the largest English-speaking nations with the majority of its population having at least some degree of fluency in the language (Cabigon, 2015), Filipino ALTs are largely considered in Japan as FNNESTs. It is because Japanese are known for their predilection to learning the native and standard English and avoidance of varieties of English (Honna & Takeshita, 1998). This sentiment is also seen in Kavanagh (2016), where he argued that it is especially strong in Japan.

Overall, the findings relevant to the present study in the Balgoa's study would be recategorized into two themes; 'Inadequacy of FNNESTs'

and 'Countering discrimination'. San Jose and Ballescas (2010) had already found that the challenges and burdens faced by Filipino ALTs were 'not being considered as native speakers' and of 'having Asian accents'. Such challenges to Filipino ALTs still remained in Balgoa's study.

An informant called Mihai realized that being nonnative was considered an inadequacy when she was corrected by the Japanese English teachers who she assisted in front of the students and the students laughed. This seemed humiliating to her considering she was corrected in front of her students and they laughed. This sentiment was shared among all other informants. They were so distressed about the inadequacy issue that they expressed a certain pride and superiority when a Japanese teacher or student or even parents would comment that they sound American. Specifically, accent as the most visible and discernible indication of nativeness and nonnativeness constructs their identity (Balgoa, 2019). Therefore, nonnative accent was assumed to severely reconfigure the ALTs' identity. It was found from some informants that the emphasis on the nonnativeness stemmed even from their coworkers who were native speakers. The informants considered this treatment as discrimination.

In this tough situation, it is amazing that some informants decided to counter this discrimination by working better and harder since, as Walkinshaw and Oanh (2014) mentioned, 'inferior language teacher' paradigm can erode the professional confidence of NNESTs. They were aware that the advantage of Filipino ALTs over NESTs was their sincere attitude and work habits; coming to class early, volunteering in activities, working overtime when they think it is necessary and without being asked to do so and etc. Their counter discrimination can be a strategy to survive and this also can structure their identity of a teacher.

Conclusion

Korea and Japan have almost the same perception that NESTs are more suitable than NNESTs in teaching English to EFL learners. The two countries also share the notion that FNNESTs are much less qualified for teaching English than LNNESTs.

However, it seems that Japan has a slightly different policy from Korea in formally approaching the issue of NESTs and NNESTs as the JET Program designs ALT candidates' academic requirements in a somewhat

inclusive manner. Therefore, there is room for FNNESTs in Japan to counter the discrimination by striving to work harder and better than NESTs. In the meantime, FNNESTs in Korea are more frustrated than ones in Japan as they were denied access to teaching by law.

Nevertheless, both countries are generally the same in the perceptions that NESTs are the best model for students to follow and FNNESTs are illegitimate. This perception is prevalent in both countries and will damage the FNNESTs' identity and their life. In addition, it will limit the students' exposure to English as an international language, and will prevent more resourceful teachers from teaching in the classroom.

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