

# ELT



## Ireland bulletin

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# What the Future Looks Like for Non-Native Teachers

by Meri Maroutian

Six years have passed since Silvana Richardson's eye-opening plenary gave an insight into how non-native teachers were struggling to find equal opportunities as native English speakers. Even though many field professionals are highly aware of the discriminatory behaviours of school employers, not much has changed in the job advertisements looking to hire unqualified native speakers over qualified professionals. It is a long battle which can be won only by raising enough awareness towards the preconceived notion of what constitutes being an English teacher.

## The reasons behind the preference of Native Speakers

There can be a variety of reasons for the preference of native speaker teachers, depending on the country one lives in. Private schools in Italy claim that a native-teacher is what students want. They are convinced that their customers are willing to pay for lessons that are conducted by teachers who solely come from the UK, US, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, because of the authenticity of the learning experience. This leads to many recruiters requesting a copy of the candidate's passport to make sure they are in fact citizens of one of the nations mentioned above. Another explanation schools use to attract clientele is that their teachers are mother tongue speakers. They like to perpetuate the idea of one accent being superior to another, insinuating that anyone who speaks with a different accent is therefore an "inadequate teacher" who does not provide the English model which is familiar to the entire world of English speakers.

## Addressing the issue from a rational point of view

Nowadays, very few people in the world live in the exact same place as they were born. Whether it is for a job opportunity or studies, people move, travel and settle in any place their hearts desire. We can say that this is definitely one of the great perks of living in the 21st century. Subsequently, many children today come from a variety of backgrounds, there is a mixture of cultural contexts, accents and races that simply cannot and should not be ignored any longer. It is not unlikely to find more than one nationality in the same family, or children of immigrant parents who are attending a school in a language that is foreign to that of their own. What is different today, compared to the not so recent past, is that the personal situations of every individual are now enriched with unique experiences and stories. These distinguishing features that make up a person need to be taken into account regardless of where one was born, and it is extremely important that we keep that in mind at all times if we want to go past the traditional definitions of what constitutes being a native speaker or teacher in 2022.

The post-colonial varieties of English are conventionally called "non-native" varieties, therefore, a heated dispute emerged in the Journal of Pragmatics with some linguists arguing that it was implicitly racist to use such terminology, as English was in actual fact the native language of many speakers of those varieties (Singh et al. 1995; Singh 1998). Whether or not one agrees with such divergence among linguistic definitions, we can all agree that during a recruitment process, most qualified "non-native" teachers pay a high price for such whimsical and pre-historic definitions used to categorise language teachers. While it is unlikely that we will hear about Indian English or Singapore English being taught at an international school level, we must understand that varieties of English are not to be demonised. If we consider the vast array of English accents and what model of Received Pronunciation we should foster (traditionally the British English accent is regarded as the standard RP), we might find it impossible to determine what "neutral" or global English sounds like. The truth is: most of the world is not made up of native speakers - as much as it might pain British English traditionalists to admit - and local varieties can do much more for English language learners.

Joan Pujolar and Bernadette O'Rourke, in their position paper entitled *The debates on "new speakers" and "non-native" speakers as symptoms of late modern anxieties over linguistic ownership*, speak of how the discomfort with the concept of "native speaker" in the area of English language teaching had been growing for some time. According to Crystal (2003), non-native speakers of English outnumber native speakers by three to one, which makes all the difference, because most publishing corporations market their teaching materials towards non-native teachers and speakers accordingly.

To sum up: We all know that the majority of English teacher professionals are not native-speakers; We are aware that most of the published materials in ELT are directed towards non-natives teachers and learners; We have developed an understanding that a main standard model English simply does not exist because of the different varieties of English even in those countries known to have English as their "Native Language".

**“ Even though many field professionals are highly aware of the discriminatory behaviours of school employers, not much has changed in the job advertisements looking to hire unqualified native speakers over qualified professionals. ”**

The questions I would like to pose are: How can we move forward from here? Will there be a change for Non Native Teachers across the globe? Can we overcome this hurdle together?

### How to promote equal job opportunities for a better tomorrow

Non-native learners and teachers are a potential source of resistance, because they have the chance to object to this lapsed hegemony as aware and active participants, and as people who have witnessed and experienced the negative perception that recruiters and unaware students have against non-native teachers. We now have the right tools to bridge the gap of understanding, social media being one amongst many, and do something about how non-native teachers will be regarded in the future.

One of the most traditional and powerful ways to spread information is through word of mouth. It is something that everyone can do. Therefore, simply speaking about the problem can go a long way and raise awareness on the issue. This is what any individual can do starting right now. *Example Situation: Any time someone wants a reference to a language teacher and asks you where the teacher is from (expecting to hear New York or London), be sure to make the effort in explaining the difference between where one is from and what qualification one holds.*

Schools should promote the inclusion of globally recognised qualifications as a requirement to enter public and private institutions for teaching English as a foreign language. From a personal point of view, I have had little to no attention despite holding a DELTA Cambridge in Parma, Italy. My name and nationality have been the biggest difficulty I have had to overcome every single time I have had to apply for a job.

We need to realise that we are not alone, and that these instances of malpractice against non-native teachers have already been addressed legally by official communications on the matter.

In fact, according to the Official Journal of the European Communities, article 21: "Any discrimination on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, **language**, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, **birth**, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited."

Hence, we should all be more alert towards advertisements and job offers coming from institutions and people who claim that having a qualification to teach is *preferable but not necessary*. These claims discredit professional teachers who have invested in their education and careers to help learners advance in their own chosen paths.

The more we, as a community, insist on seeing the same respect and opportunities given to non-native teachers as to native and mother tongue speakers or teachers, the sooner our future as English language teachers will begin to seem brighter.

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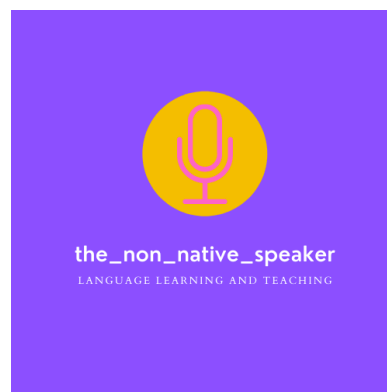


#### About the Author:

Meri Maroutian is a Delta qualified teacher based in Parma, Italy. Having lived and studied mostly in Malaysia, America and Italy, she has become aware of the social injustices reserved for those who are forever perceived as foreigners or "non-native" speakers of any given language.

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