

## ELT Journal

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Adrian Holliday  
*ELT J* 60:385-387, 2006.  
doi:10.1093/elt/ccl030

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# Native-speakerism

*Adrian Holliday*

Native-speakerism is a pervasive ideology within ELT, characterized by the belief that ‘native-speaker’ teachers represent a ‘Western culture’ from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology (Holliday 2005). Use of the concept follows a now established concern about political inequalities within ELT (for example, Canagarajah 1999, Kubota 2001, Pennycook 1994). However, other attempts to capture this inequality, for example ‘Centre’ vs. ‘Periphery’ (Phillipson 1992) and ‘BANA’ vs. ‘TESEP’ (Holliday 1994), have suffered from binary regional or cultural overgeneralization. Native-speakerism is seen instead as a divisive force which originates within particular educational cultures within the English-speaking West. While the adoption of and resistance to the ideology take place to a greater or lesser degree throughout the ELT world, the ‘native speaker’ ideal plays a widespread and complex iconic role outside as well as inside the English-speaking West.

Although some regard the terms ‘native-’ and ‘non-native speaker’ as unviable on linguistic grounds (for example, Jenkins 2000: 8–9) and constructed for the preservation of a privileged in-group (for example, Braine 1999: xv, citing Kramersch), they have a very real currency within the popular discourse of ELT. What is important is that their everyday use reveals how the profession thinks about itself. That there is often a lack of awareness of their deeper political significance is indicative of the way in which ideologies typically operate (Fairclough 1995: 36). As a result, native-speakerist prejudice is often obscured by the apparent liberalism of ‘a nice field like TESOL’ (Kubota 2001, 2002). Throughout this article, thus, ‘native speaker’ and ‘non-native speaker’ have been placed in inverted commas in recognition of their ideological construction.

The impact of native-speakerism can be seen in many aspects of professional life, from employment policy to the presentation of language. An underlying theme is the ‘othering’ of students and colleagues from outside the English-speaking West according to essentialist regional or religious cultural stereotypes, especially when they have difficulty with the specific types of active, collaborative, and self-directed ‘learner-centred’ teaching–learning techniques that have frequently been constructed and packaged as superior within the English speaking West. Such a perspective is native-speakerist because it negatively and confiningly labels what are in effect ‘non-native speaker’ ‘cultures’ as ‘dependent’, ‘hierarchical’, ‘collectivist’, ‘reticent’, ‘indirect’, ‘passive’, ‘docile’, ‘lacking in self esteem’,

'reluctant to challenge authority', 'easily dominated', 'undemocratic', or 'traditional' and, in effect, uncritical and unthinking (Holliday 2005: 19, Pennycook 2002, Kubota 2001). Although such descriptions are claimed to be the result of professional observation, their ideological, prejudicial nature becomes apparent when they recur almost indiscriminately in much ELT professional talk, literature, and training, regardless of the specific 'culture' being described (Kubota 2001, Holliday 2005: 19). Such descriptions thus represent an imagined, problematic *generalized Other* to the unproblematic Self of the 'native speaker'.

This cultural reduction, or culturism, falls within the broader chauvinistic narrative of Orientalism (Said 1978). The colonialist myth of the 'autonomous', 'organized', 'inventive' Robinson Crusoe 'civilizing' Man Friday (Pennycook 1998: 10–16) is implicit in the native-speakerist 'moral mission' to bring a 'superior' culture of teaching and learning to students and colleagues who are perceived not to be able to succeed on their own terms. The apparent liberalism of learner-centredness conceals the manipulative attempt to improve learner behaviour. The emphasis on close monitoring, 'learner training' and precise methodological staging in current practice can be seen as hiding a subtle agenda aimed at 'correcting' 'non-native speaker' culture (Anderson 2005), one which can be traced back to the behaviourist lockstep of the structural or audiolingual approach (Holliday 2005: 39).

The undoing of native-speakerism requires a type of thinking that promotes new relationships. This is already evident in discussions concerning the ownership of English and the reassessment of who we are after 9/11.<sup>1</sup> It is argued in the conclusion to Holliday (2005) that native-speakerism needs to be addressed at the level of the prejudices embedded in everyday practice, and that dominant professional discourses must be put aside if the meanings and realities of students and colleagues from outside the English-speaking West are to be understood.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> I refer here to a range of papers delivered at the 2002 American Association of Applied Linguistics and TESOL conventions by such as Kachru, Widdowson, Carey, Shuck, Norton, Lopriore and Smallwood, Gray, Luk, Sharkey, Hartford *et al.*, Vandrick, and Kubota (Holliday 2005: 15).

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