



CRITICAL REFLECTION ON EAP PRACTICE

Native speakerism in EAP: the voice of an ethnic Chinese teacher

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ABSTRACT

Triggered by a critical incident that led the author to question her legitimacy as an English language teacher, this essay presents her critical reflection on native speakerism within the EAP sector in the UK. Identifying as a social anthropologist and thus straddling the discourse communities of anthropology and English language teaching, she attempts to be 'on the inside and looking in' to discuss the issues of discrimination pertaining to recruitment, career advancement, and professional development as a 'non-native' speaker.

KEYWORDS:

native speakerism, discrimination, recruitment, career progression, professional development

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Introduction

It was in September of 2024 when what began as a mundane day at a language school ended with questions over my legitimacy as an English language teacher; my confidence was severely undermined. A student had, over two days, refused to attend my classes, choosing instead those classes taught by my white colleagues. On further investigation it transpired that she had also made excuses to leave classes taught by an ethnic Indian colleague, leading me to conclude that this student preferred to be taught by white teachers which my Indian colleague and I are visibly not. Until then I had been blissfully unaware of the concept of “native speakerism” (Holliday, 2005) which is often associated with being white. This “critical incident” (Tripp, 2011) triggered a reflective journey which caused me to review my position vis-à-vis my fellow workers and the teaching environment which I (and perhaps others) had taken for granted. Crucially, this paper is an exercise in reflexivity through my own positionality to discuss issues pertaining to recruitment and career advancement opportunities as a non-native speaker and teacher of English in the UK EAP sector.

Reflexivity is not the same as reflection

As a social anthropology PhD student in the 1990s it was impossible to escape the “reflexive turn” which challenged us to keep re-examining how by inserting ourselves into fieldwork, the results of our observations and data-gathering must therefore be distorted by the biases that come with the totality of who we are. Salzman (2002: 806) acknowledges that while this “constant awareness, assessment, and reassessment” (some have called this ‘navel-gazing’) represented a welcome shift in research methodology, he challenged the premise that a researcher’s use of their embodied and emotional filters could result in a more accurate interpretation of the reasons behind the observed behaviour.

On the other hand, Singleton and colleagues (2022: 73) note how reflexivity as a “process of critical self-reflection on one’s biases, theoretical predispositions, preferences, and so forth” (quoting Schwandt, 2001: 224) should be embedded in the very beginning of research design, from “selecting research topics through the interactions with others in the field to the final analytical and compositional processes” (citing Davies, 2007:254) if anthropologists were to come close to an understanding of social reality. This stance is echoed by Jamieson and associates (2023) who, as quantitative researchers in Psychology, advocate the incorporation of reflexivity “from the early stages of project conceptualisation to research design, to the final point of drawing conclusions from data” (Jamieson et al, 2023: 3).

It is important to note that reflection is not the same as reflexivity. Salzman’s (2002) mockery of anthropologists who believe that the simple cognizance of a certain emotion or experience (eg inordinate rage) could help them understand the action (headhunting) displayed by the people group (*Ilongot*) being researched (pp.808-9) caused me to reflect on my time on the operating table when the exact opposite happened. I had asked my anaesthetist what I would feel during the emergency Caesarean as he was about to give me an epidural. He, being completely honest, confessed, “I don’t know. From what I’ve heard it’s a bit like someone doing

the washing-up in your abdomen, but you won't feel the pain." He did not need to have been pregnant or in need of an epidural to put me at ease because he had thoroughly researched how to answer this question. Reflexivity, on the other hand, is to use such reflections (or memories), premised on my own positioning, to give context to whatever interpretations that might ensue.

A word about terminology

The path to eradicating discrimination within the ELT sector is strewn with good intentions. Instead of positioning one group as the norm/standard and everyone else as less than that, efforts have been made by many to avoid using the NS/NNS dichotomy, as summarised by Selvi and associates (2024: 16-18). You can describe me in any number of ways, but I am still a "person whose mother tongue is not English" ("PwMoTINE"?). That, immutably so, is a fact.

Years ago I took my young son to the local library 'story telling' session. When it came to singing, and "Baa, baa, black sheep" was chosen, a boy (white, blonde) piped up, "My mum says we can't say 'black sheep'." The children could not decide if the sheep in question should be white, blue, pink or brown. The leader settled on "rainbow sheep". My Pakistani friend Maj and I turned to each other and rolled our eyes. Neither of us – who had been lumped into the 'BAME' (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) category – minded the "black sheep" bit one bit. We wanted our sons to integrate, to learn mainstream British/English culture, to learn songs that British children would sing when they started school. Yet it was a white mother – with her son as proxy – who dictated (I use this term deliberately) that we could not utter the words "black sheep". It was a white person – with her son as proxy – who controlled the narrative. Ironically her objection to "black sheep" did not stop my being subsumed under the "Black Other" category in diversity surveys for many years.

We experimented with using alter/native terms in this essay, and it just sounded clumsy and contrived. I have chosen to use 'native speaker/NS' and 'non-native speaker/NNS' simply because they state a matter of fact, and in the most succinct way. It is not intended to offend any reader no matter their first language/mother tongue. It was my decision, and mine alone, to revert to using 'NS/NNS'.

My positionality: "It's complicated."

Born to ethnic Chinese parents in Singapore, I am an EAP practitioner who teaches Pre-Sessional English (PSE) courses in the UK in the summer. My identity in the EAP sector is precarious as we teach from one contract to another (see Ding & Bruce, 2017: 107). Outside of the summer period I teach EFL (as well as IELTS and Business English) on another precarious, casual (ie zero-hour) contract at a private school in Oxford. I write and publish as a social (armchair/theoretical) anthropologist who, due to a lack of a permanent university appointment, has no access to research funding, support, and ethics committees, making the

conduct of primary research problematic. Ding and Bruce (2017: 179) framed EAP as “operating at the margins of academia”. As such, I am doubly marginalised as ‘something or the other’ within academia.

In the process of getting this piece published, it had become abundantly clear that anthropologists and applied linguists constitute very different discourse communities, and who sometimes use the same terms (eg “ethnography”) in quite different ways. Although I teach EFL and EAP professionally, I was unaware of the concept of “native speakerism” because I was (am) unfamiliar with literature on linguistics and ELT research. Reflexivity has, as a process, been an immensely beneficial exercise in expanding my academic horizon with every iteration of the review regime, for which I must thank the editor and reviewers.

My ‘voice’ then is from being ‘on the inside and looking in’. Lins Ribeiro (2016: 629) notes the difficulty for an insider to “denaturalize the existing symbolic, social, economic, and political order” which explains why management consultants are brought in to analyse organizations and processes that insiders take for granted (Lee, 2014/2021). Anthropologists ‘make the familiar strange’ through questioning the very foundational nature of the most mundane. However, an outsider might suffer from “naiveté” (Lins Ribeiro, 2016: 629) as Saltzman’s (2002: 808-809) *Ilongot* headhunting rage example illustrates. As ‘an insider looking in’ at native speakerism I have both the advantages of casting an anthropological gaze from the outside and being inside the EAP sector.

Literature review

Research on native speakerism in EFL has been well documented (see Selvi et al., 2024 for a critical literature review). The question needs to be asked as to whether native speakerism (in all its different forms) also persists within the EAP sector. Typing key words into Google Scholar resulted in (to date) three peer-reviewed articles that address directly the issue of native speakerism within EAP (Jain, 2022; Tzanni, 2022; Morikawa, 2024). More papers can be found on adjacent topics such as racism, often couched in the language of social justice and decolonisation (eg Hardman, 2025), but they do not always address the racism faced by non-white teachers.

Writing in *American Anthropologist*, Lan (2022) elucidates the lived reality of different permutations of being a ‘(non) native speaker’ of English, and of being (non) white amongst the foreign EFL teachers in China and its universities. ‘Native speaker privilege’ and ‘white skin privilege’ do not overlap exactly. That a white-skinned (NNS) Venezuelan is privileged over a ‘native-speaking’ black American in China (Lan, 2022: 124) holds no surprise. Having resided for over three decades in predominantly white countries it is also my lived reality that being visibly different can lead to prejudice – or valorisation – arising from either expectations or stereotypes which are not within one’s control.

In her 2022 paper, Jain documents how she created space within her EAP curriculum for students to explore the ‘non/native’ English speaker dichotomy. Using herself (reflexively) as an

example of a translingual who spoke different languages (eg Hindi and English) from a very young age, she demonstrates to students how it is not always possible to define who is and who is not a native English speaker. As with the Chinese parents in Lan's 2022 paper (above) I note how her students often conflated 'being native' speaking with 'being white'. It is clear, though, that being multilingual like Jain is a real asset in teaching EFL/EAP. I have referenced language, literature, and history from the students' L1 (not only in Chinese) to teach EFL/EAP content, long before I came across the term 'translanguaging'.

Tzanni (2022) addresses the discrimination within EAP in recruitment practice, recounting how she had to conjure up a 'native' English-speaking relative to justify her early exposure to the language, thereby qualifying her as a 'near-native' speaker. She cites the case of a UK university implementing incomprehensible policies such as stipulating the possession of a DELTA – even when such diplomas do little to enhance EAP teaching (see Ding & Bruce, 2017: 102-3) – to prevent 'non-native' teachers from being given senior roles despite their extensive and appropriate experience (Tzanni, 2022: 7). One of her research participants highlights how even though many 'non-native' teachers were "good enough" to be hired for the summer pre-session courses, few were considered good enough for a permanent position (Tzanni, 2022:8-9), a situation of which I am acutely familiar.

Morikawa's 2024 research was based on the EAP programme in a Japanese university where she was hired for her ability to "impersonate native speakers" (2024: 453), having had the privilege, not afforded to every language teacher, of studying abroad. The policy of students being guaranteed teaching by 'native speakers' for at least one term out of four was interpreted as compensation for terms taught by local teachers, thus implying that the teaching by the latter was inferior (2024: 452). 'Non-native' teachers also encountered "linguistic racism" at staff meetings where they were marginalised by 'native' speaking teachers (Morikawa, 2024: 452). Students who felt "ashamed" to approach their 'native' English teachers due to self-perceived poor English gravitated to Morikawa for advice even when she was not their designated teacher (2024: 453). This appears to show that as far as the students were concerned, local teachers were just as competent as 'native' English language teachers, and far more approachable.

For balance I searched for literature on how 'non-native' teachers are privileged over 'native' speakers in EAP teaching. None was found (yet). Perry (2024) who, in what might be described as a slow-motion epiphany if an oxymoron is permitted, documented his own reflections on how he became aware of the "clear maltreatment" (Perry, 2024: 11) of 'non-native' English teachers which led to a change in his attitude about his fellow workers. Pointedly, it was as a pre-session EAP tutor in a UK university that he first experienced how students were receptive of 'non-native' English teachers: tutors "were judged on our abilities, and not on our nationality or race" (Perry, 2024: 8).

Reflecting on my teaching EFL / EAP journey

Becoming an EAP teacher was never on my career radar. Speaking only Cantonese for the first six years of my life I took to the English language very quickly when I was first taught

the alphabet. I started formal school soon after this and all my subjects (except Mandarin Chinese, and Malay as national language) were taught in English. I tell my EFL/EAP students this fact at the earliest opportunity as an encouragement that even ‘non-native’ speakers can attain a high level of English proficiency. Unlike the white, ‘non-native’ English-speaking teachers that Lan (2022) and Perry (2024) encountered, my physical features prevent me from hiding my ‘non-native’ speaker status. Some white-skin ‘non-native’ teachers, on the other hand, are sometimes forced to conspire with their employers to disguise their ‘non-native’ status, while others agonize over whether and/or when to disclose that English is not their mother tongue (Perry, 2024: 7-8).

Writing in English has been a key feature of my professional life: writing a magazine column at age 16; copywriting at the fourth highest-billing advertising agency in the world at 18; writing a “social analysis” column for the Sunday newspapers as a newly minted sociology graduate; and writing training courses as a change management consultant. After a one-year stint in an Amsterdam Christian Youth Hostel as a “*sociale werkster*” I was invited to edit publications for an international Christian student organization based in Greater London, primarily because I had acquired a CertTESL in 1991 (British Council, Singapore), demonstrating that I was aware of the needs of ‘L2’ readers whose L1 is not English.

After a substantial break from academia, a PhD degree at London University followed and completed within the shortest time possible, studying older Chinese migrants in the UK who lived away from their adult children in sheltered housing. As the majority of these elderly informants could not speak English, part of the fieldwork took me to EFL classes where I concluded that a judicious use of L1 (Cantonese in this case) will expedite learning and reduce frustration. Despite the curtailment of an academic career due to family circumstances which rendered me a stay-at-home mother/nurse for over a decade, I continued to read, write, present conference papers, and publish. It was not till 2016 that I was able to teach ‘proper’ ESOL classes as a local community volunteer, which soon led me to realise I needed refresher teacher training. I researched the possibilities and enrolled in an intensive teaching EAP (TEAP) course at my *alma mater* (London-SOAS) because of the sizeable alumna discount offered. I knew little of what EAP or a PSE entailed.

Hiring Practice

One would think that with a PhD, a CELTA-equivalent qualification, ESOL and university teaching experience (as departmental tutor while working on a Sociology Master’s degree by research), plus years of experience as a professional writer, I had all the qualifications needed to teach EFL/ESOL (compare Tzanni, 2022: 7). Despite numerous applications for such roles, I was never once short-listed. After my TEAP course I was emboldened to apply for EAP jobs. Again, there were zero positive responses from advertisers. As a family, we concluded that it was because I have a Chinese name. At the instigation of my then teenage son, I adopted an English first name, paired it with my husband’s English surname, and removed all references to my Chinese ethnicity in my CV. Almost immediately I found myself being shortlisted.

At my first interview at a UK university, which I shall call “Eden”, my interviewers appeared flustered and surprised to see me when I entered the room. They made references throughout that interview to a professional background I barely recognized, suggesting that they might have been looking at the wrong CV. However, I was too petrified to challenge them; they held all the power at that point. When the rejection email came (unsurprisingly), there was an offer to provide feedback to all unsuccessful shortlisted candidates, to which I responded immediately. For reasons HR refused to disclose, all three interviewers became unavailable – indefinitely – to provide any feedback. Meanwhile, a classmate on the TEAP course who had no graduate degree, university teaching experience, post-CELTA qualification, and who was equally inexperienced was offered a job at “Eden”. This person is a ‘native speaker’.

My next interview via Skype was beset by an inexplicable technical issue whereby my interviewers could see me but I could not see them after the first two seconds that we made contact. I did my best to show them the kind of EAP teacher I could *potentially* become (I was still an untested entity), and then sobbed my heart out afterwards, certain that I had failed once again. When the email arrived from the course director, I hesitated for a long time before opening it. To my surprise, he offered me a job, subject to all the usual checks. And so it was that in 2018, I joined a group of new hires teaching PSE at “Arcadia” university. In the ensuing years I learned that the course director only advertised in BALEAP where there is a stipulation “We do not allow jobs to be advertised that require native speakers of English” (<https://www.baleap.org/jobs/job-listing-guidance>). Not only had he been recruiting tutors from all ethnic, national and employment backgrounds, if suitably qualified and visa-compliant, he seemed particularly sympathetic to women who – like I – had taken a parenting break.

Legitimation

In my first two years at “Arcadia”, although I was in a team of about 50 tutors from all over the world, I was the only visibly Chinese teacher. Most of the tutors lived on campus in student accommodation and this generated a strong sense of camaraderie. I was never treated as being inferior by any of my more experienced teachers (although one older, non-resident colleague ‘blanked me’ in the lift, probably because he mistook me for a student). This contrasts with Canagarajah’s (2012) experience of needing to prove himself as a competent English language teacher to his colleagues.

The only incident of any significance in relation to being ‘non-native’ (or non-white?) was when a student exclaimed, loudly enough for me to hear, “She’s Chinese!” as I walked into the classroom. As soon as we got down to the business of learning EAP, however, nothing was said about my being a ‘non-native’ speaker, other than how many other languages I was able to speak. In fact, being Chinese in a PSE with predominantly Chinese students (from China and Taiwan) meant that I was often approached by other tutors for help in pronouncing Chinese names and to explain what they might consider cultural quirks. In my second PSE (2019) I delivered a CPD session on the significance of personal names in Chinese culture and how to pronounce them.

Initially the teachers at “Arcadia” were divided into two groups with one focusing on ‘text-based studies’ (TBS) while the other taught ‘listening and speaking’ (LNS). I naturally chose to teach TBS as I was very comfortable with the written text in various genres and have particularly enjoyed helping other academics through my peer-reviewing work. The next two PSEs (during the Covid pandemic) were conducted online, requiring us to teach all aspects of EAP, which was better aligned with my personal professional development goals of not being ‘de-skilled’ from teaching LNS.

It was at this time that I became aware of the BALEAP Accreditation Scheme which came into existence in 2014 (Ding & Bruce, 2017: 133) and, with the encouragement of a senior staff and mentor, started working on my Associate Fellow (AF) portfolio. In the spring of 2023 (three years later), I became the first EAP tutor on a temporary contract at “Arcadia” to gain BALEAP accreditation. Tzanni (2022) documented how ‘non-native’ teachers were constantly trying to gain qualifications to gain employment. Attaining an AF did not lead to better pay, higher status amongst my colleagues, or a more senior role. As an individual, though, I had become more assured as a teacher.

Professional development

Ding and Bruce (2017: 110) note that EAP practitioners making the transition from teaching EFL are often lacking in “discourse-analytical expertise” and disciplinary “methods of enquiry ... such as ethnography”. Ideally EAP teachers should have experienced a cycle of “planning and carrying out research” (p. 196). Also, engaging in original research, even if only in “one small project a year”, will bring practitioners into the “knowledge-building, knowledge-communicating body of academic staff of the university” (Ding & Bruce, 2017: 200) thus moving EAP practice from a “peripheral service activity” (p. 193) into the core of academia. In my view, such undertaking will provide real-life academic experiences that EAP tutors can draw upon when teaching.

In attempting to do this, however, I fell at the first hurdle: not being a permanent staff at a university, it was not possible to get approval by a research ethics committee (REC). I did what I expected a REC would approve and got on with the research, unpaid, using very basic tools available to me, thinking that my little piece of research might help other EFL teachers. When the research was written up and submitted to a journal it came back, many months later without having gone out to peer review, because it did not feature ‘cutting-edge research’.

That said, I had at least the privilege of library resources. Not many universities allow their casual contract EAP tutors access to their libraries outside of the PSE period. Without library access it would not have been able to work on my BALEAP portfolio, let alone write this essay. If EAP practitioners are to be empowered by engaging in, disseminating, and publishing research, then universities must provide year-round library access. Any personal experience with academic research, presenting at conferences, and publication – even in instances where we had failed – can only enhance our ability and confidence to teach the “academic” aspects of EAP.

Professional development is critical to staff retainment. When in 2025 PSE sessional teachers at “Arcadia” reflected together on why they returned year after year, some for more than ten years, the opportunity for CPD was identified as a significant factor. During our induction, we assimilate new pedagogical theory by putting it to test and into practice, thus sharing some of the frustrations our students might face during the PSE (somewhat replicating the *Ilongot* example quoted above). Such induction sessions keep us “engaged with the extant and growing literature of EAP” (Ding & Bruce, 2017: 198), and they make us each a more competent EAP tutor.

The support for gaining BALEAP recognition at “Arcadia” is also commendable. The BALEAP framework as it stands, however, does not allow sessional teachers to go further than Associate Fellowship as it requires being employed in a (permanent) EAP position, where one is involved in course design and development.

As if getting a permanent job as a ‘non-native’ speaker to teach English anywhere in the UK is not tough enough, getting a permanent job at a British university to teach in-sessional EAP presents an even bigger challenge. Unsolicited emails to heads of language support units came back with “we’ll keep your name on file”, but not once had subsequent contact been forthcoming, and not even when these departments were actively recruiting. Others insist that I needed a DELTA to be considered for any role at all, not just a senior role (compare Tzanni, 2022: 7). Proactive emails asking for face-to-face meetings were met with silence or a clear rebuff. When a university placed a recruitment advertisement, I responded. A PhD (London), AF (BALEAP), years of teaching PSE, extensive writing and editing experience, peer-reviewed articles in academic journals, chapters in a book and handbook, experience in peer-reviewing for high-impact academic journals, and numerous conference papers (including at an international ‘teaching English’ conference), etc. counted for nowt. I was not short-listed. I had used my Chinese name.

On reflection, my rejection might have had nothing to do with being Chinese, but that I lack formal qualifications in linguistics, or English. In the UK, about 50% of qualified solicitors had not studied law as undergraduates. In fact, the large City law firms often prefer non-law graduates because the contexts for clients’ needs, particularly in corporate law, are so diverse for which such graduates (from astrophysics to zoology) bring crucial disciplinary knowledge to the table (see eg. <https://www.legalcheek.com/paths-to-becoming-a-lawyer/university-non-law-degree/>). Having trained in using both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies which equipped me to work in business, and as a class assistant in a business school, I have been able to help my students refine their writing assignments on, for example, accounting concepts and theories (assets and liabilities, EBIT, EBITDA, etc). Given that most of my past students study business-related degrees rather than linguistics, it does beg the question as to why some universities insist on a background in linguistics when recruiting EAP tutors. Perhaps EAP managers should follow the lead of City law firms in employing tutors from more diverse disciplines to enhance “needs-based, outcomes-focused teaching” (Ding & Bruce, 2017: 109). Given that this discussion is on native speakerism, one cannot help but wonder if the insistence on a linguistics background applies only to ‘non-native’ speaking candidates.

Conclusion

This critical reflection was written from the perspective of a social anthropologist in the EAP sector where, as a 'non-native' English-speaking teacher and thus being 'on the inside and looking in', I have tried to elucidate how native speakerism based on the "fetishization of whiteness" (Lan, 2022: 124) has been taken for granted. It is the reflection, however, of only one person who had faced obstacles in recruitment and career development. It remains that 'native speakers' like Perry (2024: 6) could, simply by being white, walk into a school to teach English with "no qualifications". Meanwhile 'non-native' CELTA-qualified teachers, including those who have "studied language education at university" (Perry, 2024: 11), face obstacles based on physical characteristics that are not within their gift to change.

Within the EAP sector there needs to be a greater appreciation of the advantages that 'non-native' speaking teachers – even/especially those who had not studied linguistics formally – can bring to the table. That PSE pre-postgraduates in the UK do not usually question the legitimacy of 'non-native' speaking teachers (Perry, 2024: 8) bodes well for multilingual but marginalised 'non-native'-EAP teachers, and is an area deserving of further research. The question then arises as to whether funding and support might be extended to practitioners on the outer-most fringes of the EAP sector (Ding & Bruce, 2017) to bring EAP into the academic core of the university.

Many of my EFL students still look a bit apprehensive when they first encounter this non-white teacher, but like my EAP students, they seem to relax once I start teaching. No one else has asked to leave my class just because I am Chinese.

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