

A Pedagogical Response to Native-speakerism in the Globalized Workplace: Suggestions for Workplace Writing/Communication Courses

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Abstract: *With the continued development of economic globalization, native-speakerism, with its biased claim of exclusive ownership by the so-called native speakers of English, has inevitably found its way into the globalized workplace, where English is used as an international working language. Despite growing criticism of native-speakerism in English education, there is a lack of research and scholarship on what EFL educators and teachers should do to tackle the challenges presented by this workplace reality. This paper offers a useful response to these challenges by putting forward some pedagogical suggestions based on an empirical investigation of the manifestation of native-speakerism in the globalized workplace. Workplace writing/communication courses are used as a case in point in the discussion of these pedagogical suggestions.*

Keywords: *native-speakerism; English education; globalized workplace; communicative competence; workplace writing/communication*

1. Introduction

With the continued development of economic globalization, one of the most important contexts of language use, the workplace context, is becoming increasingly diversified both linguistically and culturally. Educators all over the world have developed an array of strategies accordingly to prepare college students for global work and citizenship. In the field of English education, for example, a number of new courses have emerged in the past decades such as workplace English, business English, workplace writing/communication, business English writing/communication, professional writing, and other similar courses, all of which converge into a collective effort toward the education of future workplace professionals.

As English is used as “the new international lingua franca” (St. Amant, 1999, p. 299) [1], native-speakerism, with its biased claim of exclusive ownership by the so-called native speakers of English, has inevitably found its way into the global context of work. This paper contributes to the development of workplace education courses by offering pedagogical suggestions for effectively preparing EFL students for the global workplace, which is heavily under the influence of native-speakerism. First, we offer a brief explanation of the connotation and essence of native-speakerism. Then we examine the manifestation of native-speakerism in the globalized workplace by presenting empirical evidence collected from various sources. Finally, we discuss pedagogical actions and counter-measures to be taken accordingly in the education of future workplace professionals in colleges and universities in response to native-speakerism in a global workplace context, using the workplace writing/communication course as a case in point. This investigation offers a useful and timely pedagogical response to the new realities of an increasingly globalized world.

2. Native-speakerism: connotation and essence

Native-speakerism, a term coined by Holliday [2] [3] [4], can be defined broadly or narrowly. Broadly conceived, it refers to “the over-representation of the ‘native-speaker’ (NS) point of view at the expense of the ‘non-native-speaker (NNS) one’ of a language (Waters, 2007) [5]. As such, it is not confined to any particular language. It can be manifested in English, Chinese, Spanish, Japanese, French or any language that is being taught to speakers of other languages in their effort to emulate the language behavior of native speakers of the respective target language. In the context of this paper, the term “native-speakerism” is narrowed down to the unjustified supremacy of language proficiency and

cultural knowledge of the native speakers of English (Swan, Aboshiha & Holliday, 2015, p.10) [6].

In essence, native-speakerism is a form of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) [7] and cultural chauvinism (Holliday, 2006) [8]. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the imperialistic and chauvinist nature of the native-speakerist ideology, it is apparent that native-speakerism has had a negative impact in educational, professional, and everyday contexts of language use. The following section offers an examination of the manifestation of native-speakerism in a relatively under-examined context of the use of English, namely, the globalized workplace context. It is hoped that such an examination would help raise awareness of native-speakerism in the increasingly globalized world of work so that educators and teachers can develop effective pedagogical responses and strategies accordingly in the education of future workplace practitioners.

3. Native-speakerism in the globalized workplace

Despite growing criticism, “native-speakerism” continues to be defended and practiced in many contexts of language use. As Llorca puts it, the “native speaker is under attack [...] but is still in pretty good shape” (2009, p.48) [9]. One context of language use where native-speakerism “is still in pretty good shape” is the globalized workplace, a context that has been relatively neglected and under-examined. To help raise awareness of the manifestation of “native-speakerism” in the global workplace, some empirical evidence collected from various sources is presented as follows.

3.1 English language requirements in recruitment postings

We will start with a positive note. In countries where English is used as a foreign language, jobs that involve the use of English at work often require that the candidate should have a good command of English, particularly in speaking and/or writing. Interestingly (and we would also add, fortunately,) while native speaker competence is often viewed as a major learning objective in the EFL classroom, workplace employers seem to be much more practical, for lack of a better term, than EFL teachers and learners, as is shown in recruitment postings advertising jobs that require the use of English as a working language.

For instance, the first author’s recent review of job advertisements posted on <https://cn.indeed.com/> revealed a strong preference over applicants with a good command of English but little expectation of native speaker competence for jobs that require use of English at work. “Indeed” was chosen as the site of review for several reasons. First, home-based in Singapore, “Indeed” is one of the world’s leading online recruitment platforms connecting employers and job applicants from all over the world. It is accessed by over 250 million unique visitors every month [10]. Second, the Chinese version of Indeed is currently the only online job search site in China that hosts primarily jobs that require the use of English as a working language. It is very popular among international corporations with offices or branches in China and other companies that are looking for bilingual talents fluent in both Chinese (mostly Mandarin) and English. Third, most of the recruitment postings available on the Chinese version of Indeed are written in English, suggesting on-the-job use of English to a greater or lesser extent as part of the job requirement.

In the search for recruitment postings to be reviewed, “English” was used as the only keyword without specification of job type or company location in order to ensure inclusion to the largest extent possible. The search was also narrowed down to jobs that were posted within the past 24 hours of the time of the search at 9.30 am on August 16th, 2021. The search yielded a total number of 141 results; 137 of these results were included in the review and eight were excluded to avoid contamination of the data. The four search results that were excluded are written exclusively or almost exclusively in Chinese, and some have such wordings as “simple English required” (written in Chinese), all of which seem to imply that these jobs may not require the use of English as a working language and are therefore not fit for the purpose of the research.

Of the 137 recruitment postings reviewed, five postings demonstrate an explicit commitment to native-speakerism in their description of job qualifications, using such wordings as “native proficiency (or equivalent) in English”, “outstanding written and verbal communication skills in native-level English” and the like. The other 132 postings, however, list English as an important language requirement but do not ask for native speaker competence. In terms of level of specificity, the total of 137 postings fall into two categories roughly. The first category includes those that describe the English language requirement in general terms, using “fluent in English”, “competent in English”,

“great English ability” and other similar wordings. The second category includes those that specify what kind of skills or abilities are needed for the job with such descriptions as “have a good English capacity in writing, hearing and speaking”, “able to handle technical discussion in English”, “able to negotiate professionally with different people in English” and so forth. Most of the job postings reviewed fall into the second category. Further, most postings reviewed describe English not in terms of fluency but in terms of the job candidate’s ability to use English to communicate to various stakeholders. The word “communication” appeared 68 times in the 137 postings reviewed, “communications” 7 times, and “communicate” 16 times. In short, workplace employers do not seem to share the kind of obsession with native speaker competence that many EFL teachers and students have. In terms of language requirements, they prefer to evaluate a job applicant based on whether he or she can use English functionally to perform expected job duties rather than on how close the applicant is to the native speaker standard.

3.2 Bias against NNS employees

While it seems that job applicants do not need to worry too much about being evaluated against the native speaker standard when seeking jobs that involve the use of English as an international working language, it is likely that they may fall victim to the ideology of native-speakerism on the job. The bias against NNS employees in the globalized workplace is well documented in research. According to Isserlis [11], Bausser [12], Dennett [13], Gai [14], Maslen [15] and many others, EFL employees in the global workplace are often perceived by their NS supervisors, colleagues, and clients as “deficient” speakers of English, who speak with a “strong” accent and who need to learn to adapt their writing to the “norms”. Along the same line, the working relationship between NS and NNS employees is often problematically portrayed as the former trying their best to accommodate the unjustifiably perceived deficiency of the latter instead of the two parties collaborating on the basis of a shared goal. Similarly, in his investigation of the communicative practice of ten Polish professionals working for international organizations, Wsikiewicz-Firlej found that “native English is still deemed to be the main point of reference” (2012, p 69) [16]. Such a blatantly explicit bias against NNS employees with its imperialistic and culturally chauvinist connotations is disconcerting to say the least.

3.3 Native-speakerism in corporate training programs

To help their NNS employees better adapt to a globalized working environment, many companies provide on-the-job training in workplace English and workplace English writing/communication for their employees. These training programs are either implemented in house or outsourced to private training institutions on a contractual basis. In addition, to gain a competitive edge on the international job market and boost career prospect, some workplace professionals would take the initiative to voluntarily enroll in corporate training courses offered on weekends or in the evening. Many of these courses, whether offered in house or by private training institutions, demonstrate a strong preference over native speaking teachers and encourage blind emulation of the so-called native speaker standard of English, especially in terms of pronunciation. Below are two examples from the field.

In *The World Is Flat*, an international bestselling book about globalization and its implications for individuals, companies, and nation-states, *New York Times* columnist and three-times Pulitzer Prize winner, Thomas Friedman, offered detailed experiential accounts about his trips to what he identified as emerging commercial and technological centers in China, India, Singapore, and some other countries. On one of these trips to India, he visited some corporate training classes designed specifically to help Indian employees of global companies to develop a mid-west American accent. In fact, as a mid-west American himself, he was once asked to read—and read “anything”—to the trainees so that they could imitate his “authentic” American accent [17].

This reverence of the so-called native speaker language norms as a gold standard is also seen in the kind of evening and weekend classes provided by private training institutions targeting people working for or aspiring to work for international corporations in China. These training institutions often use their native-speaking teachers as a major selling point. Take the Sweden-based Efecta (EF) as an example. EF is one of the largest private EFL institutes in the world and the official exclusive supplier of language training services for 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. As stated on its official website (Chinese version), one of the services they offer is “quality” training in workplace English and workplace English writing/communication, which includes both learning modules available for purchase by individual learners and corporate training packages provided to companies on a contractual basis. The goal of their workplace English and workplace writing/communication training modules is

to help learners become “confident” and “competent” users of English in the international workplace. In its effort to distinguish itself from its competitors in the Chinese market, EF claims that their unique strength is the creation of an “immersive” learning environment in which learners can learn “authentic” English through interaction with a primarily native speaking staff. They describe their native speaking trainers as the “core and soul of EF” and present them as one of the most important reasons why learners should choose EF over its competitors [18]. This explicit emphasis on native speaking trainers and on the kind of “authentic” English they are believed to bring to the table suggests a faithful allegiance to native-speakerism on the part of both the providers of corporate training in workplace English and, very likely, the recipients as well.

4. Pedagogical suggestions for workplace writing/communication courses

As discussed previously, native-speakerism is manifest in many aspects of language use in the global context of work. This is one of the new realities of an increasingly globalized world, which presents a daunting challenge to university teachers—both native and non-native speaking ones—who are teaching English to speakers of other languages in their effort to prepare EFL students for future work. In this section, we offer some pedagogical suggestions on how to tackle this challenge in the EFL classroom, using the workplace writing/communication course as a case in point. While all university courses are part of a unified educational system dedicated to preparing students for life and work after graduation as responsible citizens and workplace professionals, we chose to focus on the workplace English writing/communication course because it is specifically designed to prepare students for a globalized context of work that may easily fall victim to native-speakerism.

4.1 Replace native speaker competence with communicative competence

As revealed in our previous analysis of recruitment postings, most employers are not seeking job candidates with a native or near-native command of English. Instead, they value more the candidate’s ability to use English effectively for work-related purposes. Apparently, emulation of the so-called native speaker standard is not only impractical but also meaningless as a major learning objective in the English writing/communication course; it is not sought after by the prospective employers of our students to begin with. Viewed from a functional perspective, the workplace writing/communication course should aim to help students develop communicative competence in the global workplace instead of native speaker competence in a vacuum. Communicative competence, generally speaking, refers to a person’s ability to communicate with others; in other words, a communicatively competent user of a language can successfully get the intended message across to the recipient of the message through the use of this language. As an important concept in sociolinguistics, communicative competence places much emphasis on the context of language use and the achievement of mutual intelligibility (Berns, 1990) [19].

Applied to the context of the globalized workplace, and in light of the challenge of native-speakerism, communicative competence should be measured by the language user’s ability to use English as a shared working language to communicate to other speakers of English from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This ability requires not only adequate language proficiency in English (not in terms of native standard but in terms of mutual intelligibility) but also an open mind toward language and cultural diversity. After all, workplace communication is not just about getting things done; it is also about building and sustaining positive working relationships. To achieve the former, teachers should advocate a reader-centered approach to writing/communication. For example, “clarity”, “conciseness”, “ease of use”, “comprehensibility”, “reader-friendliness”, and “orientation toward informed decision-making and action” should be used as criteria of good workplace writing/communication rather than “correct” or “authentic” English. To achieve the latter, teachers should provide opportunities for students to be exposed to writing/communication pieces produced by both native and non-native speaking workplace professionals in a variety of cultural and professional contexts and engage students in critical analysis of the effectiveness of these writing samples.

4.2 Shift from a genre-based teaching approach to a task-based approach

One of the challenges for contemporary higher education is to effectively meet the needs of the workplace and to boost students’ career prospect. The traditional genre-based teaching approach in the workplace writing/communication classroom does not offer an effective pedagogical response to this challenge and, therefore, needs to be replaced by a task-based approach. Genre knowledge is surely

important, but genres should be taught not in a vacuum as fixed standards, conventions, or even recipe-like formulas; instead, students should develop familiarity with various workplace genres in the process of accomplishing particular communicative tasks based on careful analyses of target audiences and clearly identified purposes. To this end, we would like to offer two suggestions as a starting point. First, teachers should develop an informed understanding of the kind of communicative tasks that are typically expected of practitioners in today's globalized workplace context. This understanding can come from multiple sources such as by reviewing employment postings, conducting on-site visits to international companies, interviewing workplace practitioners, attending related conferences, lectures, and workshops, reading journals featuring field reports, exchanging ideas with teachers of workplace writing/communication from other schools both domestically and abroad and so forth.

The job advertisement review that was reported previously, for example, sheds some light on what types of communicative tasks our students are likely to face when they enter the globalized workplace. A close reading of not only the language requirements part of the job postings but also the duties and responsibilities listed revealed several themes. In terms of genre, knowledge of traditional workplace genres such as analytic reports, presentations and so forth is still viewed as an important qualification of job candidates. In terms of flow of information, upward communication, downward communication, and bilateral communication are all needed internally within the company, so is external communication with clients and other stakeholders. In terms of audiences and purposes, an important trend should be noted here: communicating across disciplinary and cultural contexts. Not only are workplace professionals in the global context of work expected to be able to communicate with stakeholders from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds; they should also be capable of communicating with subject-matter-experts (SMEs) as part of cross-departmental or cross-functional project teams on the one hand and preparing specialized information for non-specialized audiences on the other. In addition, with the development of web 2.0 technologies, there has been an increase in the use of social media for professional purposes. Some of these jobs reviewed, for example, specifically ask that the job applicant be able to produce communicative pieces for the company's WeChat public account. Teachers of workplace writing/communication courses should stay abreast with the times and carefully create assignments and classroom activities that adequately prepare students for these new and changing communicative tasks in the globalized workplace.

4.3 Identify, articulate, and utilize the strengths of NNS teachers

Native speaking and non-native speaking teachers of English have their respective strengths. However, the linguistic background of NS teachers has been over-rated to the extent of devaluing the strengths of NNS teachers. NNS teachers of workplace writing/communication should be encouraged to identify and articulate their strengths to both program administrators and their students. One obvious strength of NNS teachers in the EFL classroom in general is that they share the same linguistic and cultural background with their students; as EFL learners themselves, they are better able to predict and understand possible trouble spots that students may have in the process of learning English as a foreign language and offer guidance and help accordingly. Another strength is that they can help students develop cultural confidence in their native language and home culture. Due to the negative influence of native-speakerism, some EFL students may start to lose confidence or interest in their own linguistic or cultural heritage in a futile and meaningless effort toward the native speaker standard. NNS teachers can help students learn more about their own cultures and develop abilities to share their home culture with the rest of the world, thus contributing to cultural export of their home country.

In the workplace writing/communication classroom specifically, NNS teachers also have some unique strengths as compared with their NS counterparts. In previous discussions, we called for a replacement of native speaker competence with communicative competence as one of the most important learning objectives in workplace writing/communication, and we argued that communicative competence should be developed in two dimensions: language abilities and an open mind toward language and cultural diversity. NNS teachers are advantageously positioned in a way to liberate students from the shackles of native-speakerism, "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, 2006, p 385) [20] They can open their students' eyes to the many varieties of English used in various culturally localized communicative contexts. With the help of their NNS teachers, students are thus better able to see English as world Englishes and develop an "international perspective" (Wang, 2018, p.35) [21]. Further, NNS teachers are bilingual and cross-cultural communicators themselves, working in a globalized academic workplace. They can share their own experience and expertise in how to use English to accomplish job-related

communicative tasks with their students and help students develop writing/communication strategies useful for their future workplace practices.

5. Conclusion

The increasing development of globalization has presented many new challenges to educators and teachers in institutions of higher learning, one of which is to ensure students' employability and boost their career prospect. Particularly for students interested in seeking positions with foreign companies, international companies, joint-venture enterprises, or any position that require the use of English as a working language, the ability to use English to accomplish job-related communicative tasks is considered critical for professional success. It is important for educators and teachers in higher education to develop an informed understanding of the new realities in the globalized workplace so that effective pedagogical responses can be offered accordingly. One of these new realities is the presence of native-speakerism, manifest in many aspects of work, as discussed previously. We need to develop strategies to prepare our students for a globalized context of work that easily falls victim to native-speakerism. In the workplace writing/communication course, for example, native speaker competence should be replaced by communicative competence as a major learning objective, with attention to both language ability and cultural sensitivity. A task-based approach should be adopted with attention to audience, purpose, communication medium, and other contextual factors important to successful completion of a communicative task. In addition, NNS teachers should take full advantage of their unique strengths as bilingual, cross-cultural workplace communication specialists and help students develop effective writing/communication strategies for their own future practices. We hope that the pedagogical suggestions offered in this paper would provide some inspiration for other EFL teachers around the world, particularly those engaged in the teaching of workplace-related English courses, in a collective effort toward the education and preparation of future workplace professionals.

Acknowledgement

Funding: This paper is supported as part of a General Project of Philosophy and Social Science Research in Colleges and Universities in Jiangsu Province (Analysis of Purposive Samples of EFL Workplace Writing in China in a Globalized Context, 2016SJB740012)

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