

# **Navigating issues of inequity in ELT: An interview with Associate Professor Nathanael Rudolph**

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**1. Dr. Nathanael, thank you for your availability in this interview. Could you explain to us your educational background and how you become interested in English language teaching, particularly NNESTs issues?**

Thank you for the opportunity to be interviewed; I'm honored! In graduate school, I did Master's degrees in Latin American history and English language education, and my doctoral program at the University of Maryland, College Park in sociolinguistics and language education. In interviews for the TESOL NNEST of the Month Blog, I talked about my academic and professional experiences. Each time I do, I reflect differently. At the moment, what I can say is that my journey has been non-linear. I am not interested in "English language teaching" per se. I'm interested in listening to, sharing with, encouraging, and empowering people. I'm interested in the many different ways people negotiate identity and community membership, and the complex stories they share. Often, when people speak, they discuss positionality: how they position themselves and others and are positioned, in interaction (with each other in speech and writing, via images and music, and with their environment). Listening to others, and reflecting upon my own negotiation of being and belonging, has led me to focus a great deal of my personal and professional attention on (in)equity, and manifestations of privilege and marginalization in communities, and language education therein. And the lived experiences of teachers positioning themselves and/or positioned as "NNESTs," are certainly a part of this.

**2. Your works lie in the issue of the NNEST (“non-native English speaker teacher”) experience. Could you elaborate for us, regarding the pedagogical implications of this issue in ELT, particularly for EFL countries?**

I would say that a large portion of my work focuses on people’s negotiation of being and belonging. This includes, but is definitely not limited to, their participation in (English language) education. I have, as a result, interviewed many teachers who position themselves and/or are positioned, as “NNESTs.” For me, however, research should situate critical explorations of nativeness/non-nativeness” and “nativeness/not nativeness” within broader societal negotiations of “Self-Otherness.” By “Self-Otherness,” I’m referring, for example, both to how “Indonesian-ness” is negotiated within Indonesia, in addition to “Otherness” in terms of “the world beyond.” Addressing the inequity resulting from the privilege and marginalization that stakeholders in ELT in Indonesia experience in and beyond the classroom, in my opinion, involves much more than moving beyond “idealized nativeness in English.” My perspective is different from what we find in the majority of critical scholarship focused on English language teaching. Here’s how I would generally explain three key views, and how they might approach “pedagogy” differently:

*View 1: Juxtaposed nativeness*

Through this lens, people do not challenge the idea that “native (English) speakers” (usually imagined as white and western) own “their language,” nor the idea that “nativeness” is the target that learners desire to and should aim for. Instead, they challenge the idea that such teachers are, de facto, the “best” teachers (the native speaker fallacy) (Phillipson, 1992). Additionally, they are challenging the monolingual principle (Howatt, 1984): that English should be taught solely in English. The argument is that “NNESTs” can complement “NESTs” in the workplace, as they own and speak local language, and can emphasize and better connect with English language learners. If you read such literature, you will hear talk of the “strengths and weaknesses” of two categories of teacher: “native” and “non-native.” What is interesting, however, is that this approach actually creates an additional binary, based on the assignment of nativeness in “local” language to “local” teachers: “local and non-local NNEST.” A person working in Japan and utilizing this lens, for instance, would likely not be arguing for hiring Korean teachers. They would be contending for why Japanese NNESTs and NESTs can complement each other. They would not be trying to push for a move beyond English language education founded upon the knowledge, skills, experiences, thinking, behavior and speech of an imagined and idealized “native speaker,” most often viewed as white, western and male (Kubota, 1998). And, they would not challenge the presentation of “Japan,” “Japaneseness,” and “Japanese culture,” in overly simplified ways that do not allow for diverse ways of being a member of Japanese society.

*View 2: Addressing essentialized and idealized nativeness in English*

This lens challenges the native speaker fallacy and the monolingual principle, as well as the idea of “juxtaposed nativeness.” Scholars refer to native speakerism (Holliday, 2005, 2006), or the active privileging of idealized white westernness and simultaneous othering of alternate ways of being, knowing and doing, in (and beyond) language education. Through this lens, scholars utilize categories to discuss identity, experience and knowledge. Work argues, for instance, that “native speakers/NESTs” are privileged by the discourses of native speakerism, while “non-native speakers/NNESTs” are marginalized. The category of “NNEST” is viewed as one of diversity (e.g., linguistic, cultural, ethnic, religious). This work equates, both implicitly and explicitly, addressing inequity in (and beyond) the field of ELT, with addressing native speakerism (pertaining to English). As with View 1, local language use is often assigned to (local) “NNESTs,” which leaves an unresolved issue of “local” vs. “non-local.”

Though Views 1 and 2 differ regarding the idea of challenging idealized nativeness in English, they have both been positioned as part of the “NNEST Movement” (e.g., [Braine, 2010](#); [Ruecker & Ives, 2015](#)).

*View 3: Addressing essentialized and idealized being and belonging*

This view (which I share) is that attending to identity and experience, and addressing inequity, cannot be separated from what happens beyond the classroom. Scholars, social movements, and others in our communities have long documented and witnessed contextualized, sociohistorical privilege and marginalization. My research has noted, for instance, that English education in Japan portrays “Japan” as a historically homogenous country, and that preparing for interacting with “Others” involves acquiring the knowledge, skills, behavior, experiences, thinking and speech of an idealized “native speaker.” This construction of “Self” and “Other” is rooted in the historical formation of a shared national identity, during which Japan’s history as a site of movement, change, diversity and hybridity was downplayed, marginalized and erased (see [Rudolph, 2019](#)). This narrative of “Japan” continues (both inside and outside Japan) to this day, and, unfortunately, is supported by the majority of critical scholars in the domains of applied linguistics and English language education (focused indirectly, and directly, on Japan). In other words, they support the idea that “the world is diverse and complex, though Japan is not.” Participants in English language education from around the globe (e.g., scholars, teacher trainers, publishers, assessment companies and teachers) also play a role in maintaining idealized nativeness in English, and, both directly and indirectly, idealized Japaneseness). Addressing the local-global historical origins and manifestations of privilege and marginalization in Japanese society, and (English language) education therein, are, in my opinion, extremely important. Pennycook (2018) discusses how the issues we face are transdisciplinary. In other words, we need to think beyond the idea of “fields,” and draw upon scholarship and voices that serve to address specific, contextualized, sociohistorical problems and needs.

On a related note: Recently, many scholars have been working to highlight the diverse varieties, users, contexts, and functions of “English,” emerging from (ongoing) colonialism and the neoliberal promotion of English as “the” global language. And many people are discussing, for example, multilingualism and translanguaging. It would take a long time to unpack the conceptual differences between, and practical implications of this work. What I can say, that this work is 1) moving in the direction of accounting for the complexity of identity and interaction, while 2) much of this work approaches to experience and (in)equity in a way similar or equal to View 2. So, here’s a question regarding a problem I see: If we are aiming to account for the rich complexity of the world in which we live and interact, should we not attend to identity, experience and (in)equity in a similar way?

Scholars, including [Kubota \(2019\)](#), argue that categories can serve to organize, unite, give visibility to, and empower people. The use of categories to make universalized statements about people and their experiences can also be considered a form of research bias, however. It can result in stripping people of voice in a way that is counter to what critical scholarship says it is aiming to achieve.

### **3. In hiring practices, discrimination toward NNESTs is prevalent, projecting that they are pedagogically unequal to NESTs. How do you respond to this?**

In answering your question, I think it’s important not to start with an assumption that about the origin and nature of discrimination, and about who experiences it (e.g., “NNESTs,” an overgeneralized category), though this is an extremely popular approach people take in discussing English language education. Just as an example, are all teachers who position themselves, and/or are positioned as “NNESTs,” treated the same way at all levels of education, and in and beyond the classroom, in a place such as “Indonesia”? If not, is it due to their linguistic, cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, academic, religious, political or national background, or their gender or sexual orientation? What about teachers who position themselves and/or are positioned as “NESTs”? Are “native speakers” of certain backgrounds favored in private language schools, while “Indonesian” teachers make up the majority of faculty members in universities? What is going on, and why?

Using English language education at the university level in Japan as an example, scholars have highlighted the fact that discrimination generally relates both to idealized nativeness in English and idealized Japaneseness. As a result, for instance, a teacher from Singapore might be positioned as “not *really* a native speaker of English,” while a teacher from Vietnam would be considered neither a “native speaker” of English nor Japanese. A teacher from the U.S., whose identity and appearance does not align with local ideas of nativeness, can be considered inauthentic or less valuable. A “native speaker” of English or Japanese, whose identity, knowledge, skills, and experiences transcend the category they are placed in, may find such identity, knowledge, skills, and experiences devalued, ignored, or forcibly erased.

To challenge this, I might say, “There are many ways to be or become an English user, and to be Japanese or a member of Japanese society. Employing and utilizing teachers who represent such diversity is extremely valuable.” In my experience, the counter-argument is usually, “Yes, but there’s a MORE ‘correct’ way to be (e.g., a language learner, teacher or

user),” which seems simple, but is a complex, “loaded” statement that pertains to ideas of purity, correctness and valuable in terms of “language,” “culture,” “identity” and “place.” This, to me, can then be an opportunity to dialogue with and educate people regarding diverse ways of being and belonging in (and outside) their communities, and where ideas of purity, correctness and valuable come from (e.g., why people believe local dialects of “Japanese” are less educated, less valuable, less polite and even “dirty,” as contrasted against “standard Japanese”). I would argue that when we limit or eliminate space for professionals, we deprive students of the opportunity to learn from and share with the wide array of people they will likely encounter (in person, or in another way) in and beyond their communities.

The word professional is key here, too. What qualifies someone as a language teacher? In the “critically-oriented” views I discussed above, you can see that there isn’t even agreement amongst critical scholars. Maybe what we mean on a basic level, is someone who has been formally trained as a teacher or researcher-practitioner, and is equipped to contribute to students’ academic, personal and professional growth. What we do know for sure, is that people are not born experts or professionals. I was born and raised in the Seattle area, in Washington State (United States). That does not make me default authority on the infinite number of ways people negotiate identity and community membership in Washington. And I certainly do not speak for “Washingtonians.” So, in my opinion, another part of being a professional is to be a humble and attentive listener, and to model and encourage life-long learning.

#### **4. Some scholars are against the issue you advocate for. Some others agree. How do you see these debates in native and non-native speaker research? Are these productive?**

There are many ongoing debates unfolding in the literature, and in other professional activities. We see scholars, whose work advocates for “nativeness,” being challenged by critical scholars (one example of this, is the seminal debate between Randolph Quirk and Braj Kachru regarding “standards” and emergent Englishes). We see critical scholars engaged with each other, debating (directly and indirectly) what privilege and marginalization looks like, where it comes from, who experiences it, and how. People talking with each other, and not *at* or *around* each other (which is also, unfortunately, very common), is a hopeful thing, no matter how much they disagree, conceptually and practically. Debate can cause people to reflect on their own views, connect with others with similar lived experiences, provide people with lenses and corresponding vocabulary to describe (and hopefully not stifle) their experiences, empower people, and bring to light things they have never thought about before. Debate, in itself, brings attention to the need to address “something.”

Debates are often in different phases, and are occurring with different levels of complexity, depending on the place and venue. This can be due to things including a) the worldviews and agendas people have, b) the materials and dialogue they have had access to, c) the training they’ve experienced, d) the context they are living, working and studying in, and e) whether they are familiar with localized and globalized conversations that include diverse ways of thinking about (in)equity, or if they are not, or don’t want to be, for whatever reason. This is just good to remember, when we read about or listen to someone discussing issues that pertain to and extend beyond our profession/s.

**5. In search of effective advocacy regarding NNESTs issues in EFL countries, are there any NNESTs movements that support the research?**

There are definitely people discussing equity, diversity and inclusivity in settings around the globe, both in local grassroots movements, and in visible and prestigious spaces, within and beyond English language education. In Indonesia, for example, I can think of quite a few people, including Christine Manara (editor of the *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching*), who are cultivating dialogue and providing stakeholders in English language education with opportunities to empower and be empowered.

For people looking to learn and find and/or provide space for voice, access to resources (e.g., articles; conferences; conversations with other people; mentoring; the internet; money, above all) is very often a limiting factor. Those of us with access to such resources must share them. This includes giving our time to others, living out what we say we believe.

**6. In the context of scholarly publication, do you encounter any problems with regard to NNEST issues?**

This is a big question that deserves a lot of attention (more than I can give here). If this question is asking about “NNESTs” being published, I would say that certainly many people have encountered the “please have a native speaker check your paper” responses, and may have had their work rejected due to it being labeled “nonnative.” Acceptance or rejection of papers is often ideological and can certainly be discriminatory, though this is not limited to the work of “NNESTs.” Critically-oriented scholarship and presentations are increasingly visible around the globe, though it often depends on context, venue (the type of publication), and who is in charge of the publication.

**7. How would you suggest teachers in EFL countries be exposed to issues of inequity in their professional development?**

I completely understand what you mean by “EFL countries.” When we say that, we are talking about nation-states such as “Indonesia” or “China.” My concern with this is that this wipes away the rich, contextualized diversity and complexity found in each place, and confines them all together in one category (“EFL countries”). If we just take Indonesia as an example, linguistic, cultural, ethnic, political, socioeconomic, religious, geographic, and gender-related privileging and marginalization manifest in very different ways within, and transcending, communities. I therefore feel it is important for teachers, teacher educators, and other individuals invested in (language) education, to have the opportunity to explore and reflect upon people’s contextualized negotiations of identity and community membership in their communities, and how privilege and marginalization shapes and is shaped by English language education. Having learners, teachers and other stakeholders in language education draw upon, share, reflect upon and discuss their experiences in and beyond English language education is extremely valuable.

I think you used an important word in the question: “expose.” When I speak with my students and colleagues, and we explore being and belonging in Japanese society, and ELT therein, I’m not trying to force them to alter their view of Japaneseness to align with my own. Many of my students and colleagues believe in the narrative that Japan is a “homogenous” nation, and derive their identity and worldview from this idea. I can guide them in exploring diversity and inequity, or prompt them to explore on their own. Doing so can be extremely threatening to some people, and for others, powerfully enlightening. When we, as professionals, touch upon the nature and origin of inequity, and discuss things like “Self” and “Otherness,” we are shining light into dark and hidden places, and that can endanger us, our research participants, our colleagues and students, and other members of our community (academically, professionally, mentally and even physically). I, therefore, feel that teachers must contemplate how to share their message in a contextualized, transformative way, while being aware of the danger and potential sacrifice their efforts may entail (which they certainly might already be aware of).

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