

NAVIGATING NATIVE-SPEAKERISM: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY WORK OF PAKISTANI EFL TEACHERS IN ELITE PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

The narrative inquiry aims to explore the ways of how Pakistani English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in high-end private universities manage the native-speakerism in their professional identity work. Based on semi-structured interviews of twelve university teachers in Lahore and Islamabad, the research indicates intricate identity conflicts based on institutionalised preferences of native speakers, student expectations, and policy discourses. Critique shows that participants make strategic identity negotiations on three main processes, which are resisting deficit positioning, appropriating professional legitimacy, and reconstituting expertise via localised pedagogical knowledge. The results disturb the dichotomy between the native and non-native speaker identity, and demonstrate how narrative re-positioning helps Pakistani teachers take ownership. The research has added to the postcolonial criticism of ELT by preempting the South Asian voices and does provide implications of Higher Education Commission (HEC) policy on teacher recruitment criteria, teacher education programmes, and decolonisation movements in Pakistani higher education. The study covers a serious gap in empirical research on the topic of professional identity work of local EFL teachers in the stratified education system of Pakistan.

Keywords: native-speakerism, professional identity, narrative inquiry, Pakistani EFL teachers, elite private universities, decolonisation

Introduction

The domination of native speaking among English Language Teaching (ELT) has long been an ideological rubric of hierarchical organization of professional competence and linguistic authenticity (Holliday, 2006; Phillipson, 1992). This construct continues to isolate the bilingual and multilingual teachers especially in the postcolonial settings where English serves as a language of status, economic mobility and historical dominance (Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 1998). In Pakistan, the history of British colonialism still echoes in the modern language policy and educational stratification, which provides a complicated landscape whereby local EFL teachers have to bargain their professional rights against the strongly established native-speaker ideologies (Rahman, 2002; Mahboob, 2009). The current research paper discusses this narrative inquiry in negotiation by looking at how Pakistani EFL educators in elite private universities negotiate, challenge, and reassess their professional selves in native-speakerist discourses.

There is a high level of stratification in Pakistani higher education, as an elite of elite private universities set high tuition fees, seek internationally mobile instructors, and serve as providers of global standards (Farooq, 2016; Khan and Bukhari, 2018). In these schools, native-speakerism takes the form of discriminatory employment, dissimilar compensation systems, and privileging Inner Circle varieties of English in the curriculum (Ali and Perveen, 2013; Anwar and Zia, 2015). Although the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan establishes minimum ratings of qualification, it has not actively addressed native-speakerist prejudices in the institutional recruitment methods, thus continuing structural injustices in the academic labour market (Mustafa, 2012; HEC, 2020). As a result, EFL teachers of Pakistani origin face specific professional identity issues that are still under-theorised in both international and local research sources.

Professional identity is socially negotiated and changing, not a predetermined characteristic, and it manifests itself during the interactions of the teachers with the institutional discourses, pedagogical practices, and the community memberships (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; Day, 2002). In the case of EFL teachers, in particular, identity work is the process of living between conflicting demands on language authenticity, pedagogical proficiency, and cultural identification (Varghese, 2006; Norton, 2013). In native-speakerist contexts, non-native educators often find themselves placed in a status of inferiority or un-assurance and have to engage in constant identity work and self-defense (Rivers and Mills, 2011; Menard-Warwick, 2011). The narrative inquiry is especially fruitful in digging these identity practices since narratives allow educators to make sense of professional experiences, claim agency, and resist marginalising discourses (Barkhuizen, 2016; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

Although the research on the empirical studies in the native-speakerism field is flourishing globally, there is little research based in Pakistan. Current research heavily focuses on the language policy, curriculum design, or student attitudes and little is known about the subjective experience and identity work of teachers (Mansoor, 2005; Shamim, 2011). Initially, the phenomenon of discriminatory hiring is described by notable exceptions such as Khan and Bukhari (2018), but the theorisation of identity formation as a process takes place in the studies by Anwar and Zia (2015); nevertheless, these studies use the method of survey that cannot reflect the complex process nature of identity negotiation. The current study is therefore a response to this gap by using the narrative inquiry to understand the ways in which Pakistani EFL teachers negotiate the concept of native-speakerism through stories they provide about their professional experiences. This emphasis is consistent with the decolonial demand to put marginalised voices into the forefront and undermine Eurocentric epistemology in ELT research (Kumaravadivelu, 2016; Canagarajah, 1999).

The study is guided by three research questions:

1. How do Pakistani EFL teachers in elite private universities narrate their experiences of native-speakerism within their professional contexts?
2. What identity tensions and contradictions emerge in their professional identity work?
3. What strategies do teachers employ to navigate, resist, or reconfigure native-speakerist discourses?

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Analysis and Results

As the narrative analysis showed, there were three interconnected processes which Pakistani EFL teachers used to cope with native-speakerism in order to resist deficit positioning, borrow professional legitimacy, and rebuild expertise with the help of localised pedagogical knowledge.

These were not separate steps but were overlapping and even contradictory strategies followed by the participants in varied situations and interactions.

Fighting Deficit Positioning.

Participants would always have stories about how institutional routines and attitudes on their part as students framed them as lacking due to their Pakistani nationality. However, instead of internalising all these subject positions, teachers instead fought against them with counter-narratives that undermined the native-speakerist binary. When asked about her reaction to a department meeting where the senior management was extolling international faculty, Aisha who is based in Lahore said:

The Dean persisted in saying how our foreign co-workers import global views and pure language models. I got up eventually and told him, Sir, with respect, I have been a supervisor of thirty BA theses and have designed three courses that are HEC-compliant. What the hell is more true about that? Everyone went quiet. I was aware I was taking a risk but this constant devaluation was simply intolerable.

The speech act which openly opposes institutional authority is the one carried out by Aisha herself to narrate her story. She redefines herself as no longer a passive recipient of other people's applause but as an active champion of local knowledge. The term with respect indicates respect that is supposed to be offered to the Pakistani hierarchies and the next question that she poses serves to undermine the said hierarchy by implying accountability. Her experience is a great example of how the struggle can demand a certain balancing of assertion and the cultural traits of respect when dealing with the local power frameworks.

Equally, Bilal, a thirty-five-year-old PHD student of a public sector university, shared his experience of a Quality Enhancement Cell (QEC) assessment:

The members of the QEC team inquired about my being exposed to every best practice of the international frontiers. I demonstrated to them my articles in ELT Journal and TESOL Quarterly and my British Council training certificate and letters of UK partners. It is a best practice of the world, I said, being made here in Pakistan. The British consultant who was the lead assessor had nothing to say. It was the first time I have felt that I had cut off the discourse, at least in the short term.

The story of Bilal brings out tactical use of globally recognised qualifications to oppose the localisation as being regionally confined. He redefines the criteria of evaluation by modifying the meaning of international not as a geographical point of origin but as a quality standard. His story describes mimicry (Bhabha, 1994) made strategic: he does not become more native-like but he wants to gain the same status of a professional.

Taking on Professional Legitimacy

Whereas resistance was direct challenge, appropriation focused on seizing professional power by means of other legitimacy practices. Qualifications, pedagogical success and institutional contribution were some of the things that participants used to claim that they were competent regardless of whether they were native speakers. A twenty-nine year MPhil teacher in an Islamabad university named Sara built her legitimacy by student results:

I have always scored highest in IELTS preparation module among my students. When parents demand a native speaker tutor I present them with statistics: the average band scores of my students are 7.5, and 6.8 with visiting British lecturers. Numbers don't have accents. I have been taught to arm with evidence since I will never fit in the subjective argument on what defines authenticity.

The weaponisation lawfully used by Sara, puts her in an offensive mode of operation in a hostile working environment. Mobilising measurable results, she adapts the discourse of responsibility of which elite universities are so proud and, at the same time, delegitimises accent as a factor in the effectiveness of teaching. Her account is indicative of what Menard-Warwick (2011) refers to as pedagogical authority whereby expertise is based on efficiency, as opposed to position.

Omar, a senior lecturer who had a twelve years experience and was forty years of age, described how he accumulated institutional capital over time:

At the time of my arrival, I was the sole Pakistani instructor in teaching the first year composition. Remedial sections were allocated to me by the Head of Department, . I created a diagnostic evaluation instrument specifically designed in accordance with the L1 interference pattern of our students. It has become the university-wide one now and I have trained three faculty members on this. The power balance was changed: now they require my knowledge regarding our students.

The example of Omar is a legitimate peripheral participation which has been turned into central membership by building up a context-specific knowledge (Wenger, 1998). He transforms his perceived lack, knowledge of local learner problems, into special knowledge. The plot development of an outcast and outsider to a necessary guru shows the transformation of forms of power within the community through legitimacy appropriation.

Reconstituting Expertise Highly Localised Pedagogical Knowledge.

Most importantly, perhaps, participants re-forms professional knowledge by anticipating pedagogic benefits of a common linguistic and cultural background with students. Instead of considering Pakistani identity as deficit, they framed it as having access to distinctive teaching informational knowledge. Zainab was a thirty-three-year-old PhD, who stated:

My students are always code-switching. These relationships in translanguaging can only be explained by a bilingual teacher. A single language native speaker would be lost. I explain to my students, "You must have someone who knows why you commit these mistakes, not that you do them.'

The story Zainab tells demonstrates the hoax that native speakers are the ideal teacher attribute. With the appreciation of metalinguistic awareness, she reconstructs expertise as based on bilingual competence and not on native intuition. Her application of Urdu is the example of translanguaging as pedagogical resource which is not practiced in the methodology of native-speakerists (Canagarajah, 1999).

Farhan, a thirty-six year visiting faculty member, defined this reconstitution most explicitly: The best universities adopt British teachers who are not aware of the lives of our students. They give me examples concerning pubs and cricket, whereas my students require English when speaking in parliament and conducting business negotiations. I'm not teaching "English". I teach professional English to Pakistani. Quite another skill, that, and it's our prerogative.'

Farhan claims to make them theirs by right, and claims epistemic sovereignty over locally relevant English pedagogy of the postcolonial decolonisation. He opposes the native-speakerist confusion of the English language with the British culture, and recreates it as an instrument of Pakistani professional involvement. His story explains how educators may go beyond the defensive reaction to active reimagining of ELT purpose.

Identity Conflicts and Paradoxes.

The identity tensions were not solved by these navigation strategies but brought them into the limelight. The participants were occupying various positions at once, and some of them were contradictory. This ambivalence was recorded in Samina, a thirty-eight-year-old PhD:

I was a month ago defending a local colleague of mine against discriminatory remarks. I am also seeking a British Council fellowship this month in order to acquire UK experience. Am I hypocrite? Maybe. However, here, only rebellion and obedience will see one through. Here, I require the foreign credential to be listened to, as I criticize the system there. It is the system that is contradicting me.

The story of Samina shows the dual consciousness (Du Bois, 1903) that one needs to adopt to maneuver in a native-speakerism world. She appreciates that her resistance strategies coexist with pragmatic accommodation, which forms continuing identity work instead of stable resolution. These contradictions indicate material facts of Pakistani academia, in which international qualifications are still a currency of career progress despite undergoing challenges in their ideological underpinnings.

Discussion

The results show that Pakistani EFL instructors in elite private universities are involved in complex, multifaceted identity labor to manoeuvre around native-speakerism. Participants also have agency power by repositioning narratives through agentic force to challenge, appropriate and rebuild professional legitimacy, rather than being passive victims of discriminatory structures. This agency, however, works under restrictive material and discursive circumstances that reproduce native-speakerist hierarchies.

The three processes identified coincide with but are the extensions of the previous theoretical frameworks. Existing opposition to deficit positioning is similar to the opposition to deficit positioning observed by Park (2012) and Menard-Warwick (2011), but there are particular dynamics involved in the Pakistani context: the necessity to strike the balance between assertion and the cultural expectations of respect, and the strategic use of the HEC-imposed quality standards and the native-speakerist preferences. The opposition of the participants is not a complete denial but a relative challenge of local authority, which acknowledges the local power systems.

Professional legitimacy appropriation depicts the notion of competence claims proposed by Wenger (1998), but exposes the falsification of legitimate peripheral participation by native-speakerism. As opposed to normal CoP trajectories, Pakistani teachers are kept on periphery irrespective of competence displayed, so they have to do legitimacy work continuously. Mobilising quantifiable outcomes and creating context-specific tools, which are some of the strategies involved in appropriation, are the actions of the boundaries that explain the local expertise using transnational standards (Canagarajah, 1999).

Most importantly, the process of reconstructing expertise based on the localised pedagogical knowledge enhances postcolonial critiques of ELT. The respondents are no longer defending themselves with the claims of equality, but proclaiming superiority of bilingual and contextually supported pedagogy towards Pakistani learners. This is the epistemic decolonisation: the abandonment of the Eurocentric models as universal and the centralization of indigenous pedagogical knowledge. An idea such as Pakistani professional English by Farhan is similar to the one conceived by Kumaravadivelu (2016), which is to promote post-method pedagogies, which are not based on foreign models but developed out of local needs.

These results have certain policy implications on HEC. As quality indicator, the Quality Assurance Manual of the Commission (2020) now focuses on international faculty recruitment, which unconsciously promotes native-speakerism. The amendments must explicitly acknowledge the existence of the local knowledge as a unique competency, and the institutions need to record how they appreciate the contribution of Pakistani faculty. The developmental programmes used in professional development must change the emphasis on the remedial approach of eliminating accent rather than providing translanguaging pedagogies and context-based approach. Moreover, HEC ought to require non-discriminatory hiring policies that do not allow the use of the language 'native speaker preferred' instead of a qualification-based policy.

When compared with the Pakistani context, the institutionalisation of native-speakerism is more evident than recorded in the Japanese (Rivers and Mills, 2011) or Korean (Park, 2012) ones where local teachers form obvious majorities. The elite private universities of Pakistan are working in the postcolonial economies of prestige and they consider foreign faculty as an asset (both to teaching and to marketing). This commercialization adds more pressure to identity work. On the other hand, the strategic application of shared linguistic repertoires by Pakistani teachers to the students seems to be more salient compared to the situation when the linguistic backgrounds of L1 are more heterogeneous and thus, bilingualism can be viewed as an under-theorised resource.

The decolonial orientation of the study makes the researchers question how teachers can survive native-speakerism but how they can recreate ELT in the Global South. The stories of the participants predetermine the new approach to ELT pedagogy the one that accepts the concept of translanguaging, promotes the importance of metalinguistic consciousness, and prioritizes the needs of local professionals. It is proposed that future research understand how these separate resistance tactics are brought together to form collective action towards epistemic decolonisation.

Conclusion

This ethnographic inquiry sheds some light on the way male Pakistani EFL teachers in elite private universities engage in negotiating native-speakerism in three identity work practices: opposing a deficit position, gaining professional legitimacy, and re-forming expertise via localised pedagogical knowledge. Quite to the contrary, participants are active agents of narratively re-establishing themselves as qualified professionals as opposed to passive receivers of marginalising discourses. In their narratives, they demonstrate that professional identity is not a stable quality but is the process of continuous negotiation that is molded by the legacies of postcolonialism and the modern practises in institutions.

The work contributes to the research in three ways. Theoretically, it expands postcolonial criticism of the native-speakerism by showing how Pakistani teachers explicitly re-assemble as opposed to passively agitating against marginalisation, take epistemic control of ELT pedagogy. In terms of methodology, it illustrates the ability of narrative inquiry to represent the processual identity work in non-Western settings in order to enhance teacher research in the world. In practice, it offers evidence-based policy recommendations to HEC to revise their policy, to recognise the local expertise, to have inclusive hiring criteria, and to decolonise professional development.

Limitations involve the fact that the study focuses on elite private universities and it may not reflect experiences in government institutions or in smaller colleges. Further, narrative interviews also record the enacted identities that might not be similar to classroom practices and this ought to be included in future studies and the methods used through classroom observation and the views of

students. Although the sample size used was suitable to the narrative enquiry, it reduces generalisability.

The next generation of studies is to explore the possibilities of such individual strategies coming together to form collective professional movements. Longitudinal research would be able to track development in identity over career lifestyles and comparative research among different South Asian settings may reveal regions unique patterns. More importantly, studies should no longer be about describing how things are discriminated, but how Global South teachers transform ELT in their own terms, with a larger contribution to decolonial projects in applied linguistics.

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