Albert P'Rayan

Whose English is it?

The Hindu,dt:12.01.2026,pg.no.5

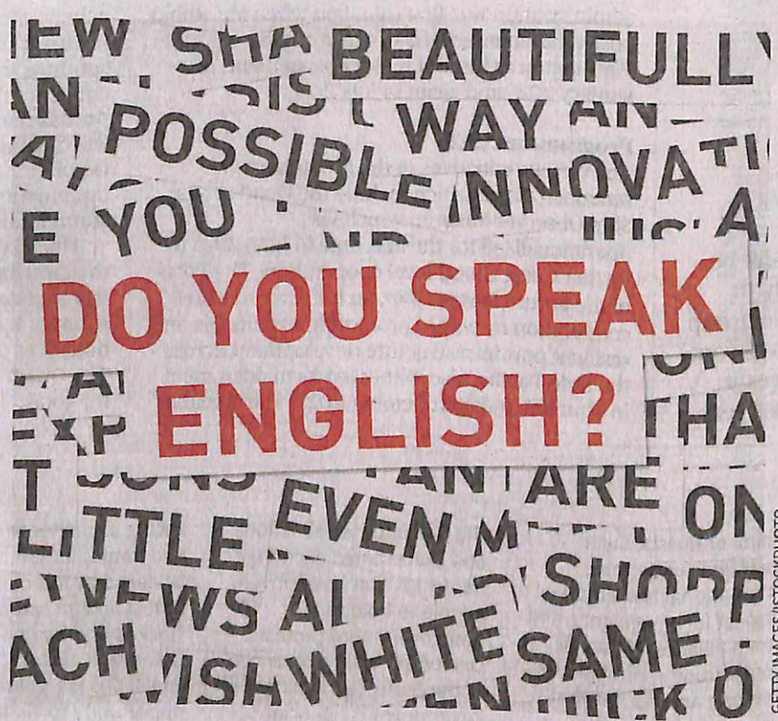
An interview with ELT expert Alan Maley on native-speakerism in English

"Native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) preferred". "Must be a native English speaker with an American or British accent". "Anglo-Indian teachers can apply." Such statements are commonly found in advertisements for English teaching positions.

Native-speakerism in English is an ideology that privileges British or American English and assumes that native speakers are inherently more qualified to teach English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL). This perpetuates discriminatory practices in English language teaching (ELT), where highly proficient and professionally trained non-native teachers are often marginalised, their competence questioned, and their expertise undervalued.

In recent decades, ELT professionals advocating inclusivity and equity have increasingly challenged this ideology. Grounded in the concept of World Englishes – the diverse and dynamic varieties of English used worldwide – they argue that these should be acknowledged, respected, and valued rather than hierarchically ranked.

In this interview, Alan Maley, a renowned ELT expert and advocate of Global English, discusses the origins of native-speakerism, the reasons for its persistence, its continuing impact on the profession worldwide, and the need to dismantle it.



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

How do you conceptualise native-speakerism within the context of English language teaching?

The dominance of languages is closely linked to economic, military, cultural, and political power. English has achieved unprecedented global reach. As a result, English language teaching has become a highly profitable international industry. Since the 1960s, demand for English has grown exponentially, with the U.K. and the U.S. dominating teacher education, research, publishing, and testing. Institutions offering tests and qualifications such as TOEFL, IELTS, CELTA, and DELTA are largely based in these countries. This concentration of authority reinforces the belief that native speakers are inherently better teachers.

To what extent do Western-centric models of ELT continue to sustain native-speakerism?

The professionalisation of ELT has largely been driven by English-speaking countries. Dictionaries, grammars, qualifications, and assessments have standardised English and concentrated control over the language in metropolitan centres. Standardisation enables reification – turning language into an object – which then allows commodification. Western models of "standard" English therefore underpin the continuing assumption of native-speaker superiority.

How does native-speakerism affect the quality, diversity, and inclusivity of ELT worldwide?

Clearly, native-speakerism has the effect of undervaluing non-native speaker teachers, which impacts their self-esteem and potentially reduces their motivation for professional development. In this respect, it can diminish the quality of the teaching on offer.

But we also need to remember that, statistically, native-speaker teachers of English will always be in a minority. As the level of expertise grows in countries around the world, so the value of non-native speaker teachers is enhanced. We can observe this in the invaluable work of language teacher associations in many countries worldwide. So, I think the credibility of the native-speaker hegemony is on the wane, though it has by no means disappeared.

What steps can institutions take to ensure more equitable recruitment practices?

This is close to my heart. In 1998, I was invited to set up an M.A. programme at a prestigious private university in Thailand. I accepted on the condition that I would have a free hand in appointing faculty. As our students were from across Asia, I appointed lecturers of diverse nationalities: Indian, Singaporean, Italian, Burmese, Dutch and Thai. I was the only native speaker. This caused consternation in the upper echelons of the university, and also among our first batches of students, who asked, "Where are the native speakers?" However, the quality of the course soon established our reputation, showing that a more inclusive policy can work.

How do deeply held beliefs about "standard" or "correct" English continue to reinforce native-speakerism, even when inclusive practices are demonstrably effective?

Language use is inherently variable and constantly changing, yet humans attempt to codify and standardise it. Standardisation serves practical purposes, but it is also linked to power, control, and nation-building. So-called "standard English" is, therefore, a convenient fiction. While one or two standard varieties may be useful for international communication, learners should be prepared to encounter multiple Englishes.

What concrete measures can counter native-speakerist assumptions?

Teacher educators play a key role in raising awareness, and publishers and institutions such as the British Council are increasingly open to questioning long-held beliefs about native-speaker superiority.

How do you envision the future of ELT beyond native-speakerism?

We must rethink how English is taught and reassess its role as a global language. This reorientation allows us to imagine a more inclusive ELT profession – one that values competence over origin, embraces linguistic diversity, and recognises English as a shared global resource rather than the property of a privileged few.

**The term World Englishes was introduced by linguist Braj Kachru at the 1984 TESOL Conference held in Houston, Texas, the U.S.*

The writer is an ELT resource person and education columnist. Email rayanal@yahoo.co.uk