A Chinese Study of Foreign English Teachers Employment in Online Recruitment Advertisements

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Abstract: *The research focuses on the question of whether the norm based the native speakerism has been embedded in the online recruitment advertisements for English teachers in the second tier city, Xi'an of China. The research reports findings from analysis of job advertisements in the two online job websites eChinacities and Bosszhipin — 37 for Bosszhipin and 92 for eChinacitie. The analysis reveals that regardless of scholarly efforts to promote professionalism instead of native speakerism within the teachers of English, native speakerism is still an important hiring criterion in job recruitment and discrimination against Non-native English language teachers (NNELT) is still evident in English professionals. Such discrimination may put NNELT at a disadvantage in their competition for positions in schools. This suggests that it is professionalism instead of native speakerism that should be the criteria in recruitment for English teachers.*

Keywords: *Native, Non-Native, English language Teachers, Online recruitment advertisements*

1. Introduction

English is spoken by an increasing number of people as second or foreign language more than as a mother tongue (Llurda, 2004)[17]. Recent statistics have shown that the number of non-native speakers (NNS) substantially outnumbers the native speakers (NS). There is no denying that the overwhelming majority of English teachers aren't native speakers but they are unequally treated in employment.

In the last few decades, numerous researchers and scholars have made attempts to promote the position of Non native English language teachers (NNELTs) and oppose the native speaker norms in English language teaching (ELT). Piller (2001)[22], for example, called on the public to get rid of the notion of nativity and discard the useless concept of NS. Also, many efforts have been put into emphasizing more professionalism rather than native-speakerism of English teachers in teaching. When the employers recruit an English teacher, the ideal requirement should be based on English proficiency and teaching qualification.

However, to the disappointment of NS, NS are still the first choice of employers among all English teachers wanted in contemporary China (Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002)[15] and those who are not from the "inner circle" (Kachru, 1985)[14], still, in general, occupy marginal and inferior positions in the job-hunting market. Non-native status of teachers is an important influential criterion in employment (Clark & Paran, 2007)[5]. It is a common perception that the status of non-nativeness makes NNELTs somehow jeopardized and at a disadvantage regardless of their profession and qualification in employment.

While many researchers (Clark & Paran, 2007; Lengeling & Pablo[16], 2012; Mahboob et.al.[20], 2004; Ruecker [24], 2011)have looked into hiring practices major cities in America, the UK and some Asian countries, the criteria used by administrators in hiring English language teachers in the context of the second or third tier cities in China remain largely unexplored. With the increasing demand of English teachers in fast developing second or third tier cities in China, there is a growing concern to all employers: What criteria should be used to hire English teachers in such a dichotomous context? And as the online job hunting websites and apps are getting more popularity among job hunters, what are the criteria are used by school administrators? The purpose of the present study is to investigate the significance school administrators attribute to criteria including qualifications and native speakerism from online job apps and discuss the employment discrimination issues faced by NNELTs despite the increasing awareness that both NNS and NS are compatible to offer their learners.

2. Literature Review

2.1. A dichotomy between NS and NNS and review of native speakerism

Though the Three Circle Model of World Englishes produced by Kachru (1985)[14] is influential, it is problematic because it puts the Inner Circle and NS into the central position and undermines undermines the competencies and proficiency of non-native teachers (Thomas, 1999, p. 7)[28]. In this model, the use of English is divided into three circles: the Inner Circle, including countries such as the US and the UK, where English serves as a native language; the Outer Circle, including countries like Singapore and India, where English is an official language; and the Expanding Circle, including countries like China and Japan, where English is widely used as a foreign language in certain contexts.

Consequently, English teachers are labeled as NELTs and NNELTs based on their origins. NELTs are regarded as the ideal English teachers and NNELTs are underestimated as less professional, and this ideology is addressed and termed the "native speaker fallacy"by Phillipson (2018)[21]. Holliday (2015)[12] referred to the same concept as native-speakerism, an ideology reflecting the belief that native speakers are ideal English teachers in terms of English language and its teaching methodology because of their western cultural origin.

However, with as the wide spread of English as an international language and globalisation of the language, the ownership of English has significantly changed, which leads to the dissolution of the dichotomy between NS and NNS. As Crystal (2002)[8] pointed out, no one owns English now. Therefore, there has been an ongoing discussion about the prevalence and appropriacy of native-speakerism in language teaching.

This issue of anti-professionalism and native speaker preference has been prominently highlighted in the literature on applied linguistics. Clark and Paran (2007) reported that more than 70% of the 90 employers in a study of employment in the U.K regarded the native English speaker norm as an important factor in recruitment. Thus, due to this bias, competent NNELTs are not taken into consideration in the recruitment process. The research of Balgoa (2019)[2] revealed the fact that her Filipino English teacher participants in Japan faced discrimination in working and four of them experienced being criticized and corrected by other teachers because of their accents. One of the Filipino teachers said being nonnative made her an inadequate English teacher.

Many scholarly efforts (e.g., Aneja[1], 2016; Braine[3], 1999; Ellis[10], 2016) have promoted the position of NNELTs and the fight against discrimination and anti-professionalism. They appealed to reexamining and withdrawing the use of dichotomous terms, such as NEST and NNEST, due to the fact that these labels oversimplify the complexity of teachers' identity. Rudolph, Selvi,and Yazan[23] (2015) advised to re-conceptualize the NNEST construct and study nonnativeness through a poststructuralist approach. On the contrary, Graham(2017)[11] claimed that the term NNEST should be retained to represent a large number of unified marginalized teachers in such a job market where there still exists discrimination and inequity towards NNESTs.

2.2. Research on NELT and NNELT in Recruitment

As the Position Statement Against Discrimination of Nonnative Speakers of English in the Field of TESOL (2006)[27] pointed, it is "the English language proficiency, teaching experience, and professionalism" that should be stressed in English teaching. And the same principle should be applied when employers hire English teachers. However, influenced by the misconception of NS as ideal teachers, unequal employment of NNS still exists. Many scholars have explored a wide range of discriminatory criteria in hiring places.

Exploring the recruitment in America, Mahboob et.al.(2004)[20] conducted their investigation by means of surveys consisting of questions about criteria adopted by administrators and reported that nearly sixty percent of administrators of intensive English programs admitted that when they hired an English teacher, NELT status was somehow an important requirement.

By Clark and Paran (2007) in the UK, emailed questionnaires with adapted Likert scale were used to investigate the hiring criteria for English teachers who were responsible for recruitment at English language teaching institutions in the UK. It turned out that more than 70 percent of employers regarded native-speaker status as important. Thus, Clark and Paran (2007) proposed that more factors other than the native English speaker norm should be taken into consideration when employers recruit teachers.

Ruecker (2011) [24]conducted his research with a race theory lens and found that in the countries from "the Outer Circle" where English is widely spoken, such as India, employers set strict visa requirements when hiring English teachers. Employers in these countries showed great preference for English teachers who have been from "Inner Circle", in other words, NELTs. What's more, they demand more on requirements for NNELTs.

In a discourse analysis of discourses and images in 39 recruitment advertisements in Mexico, part of "the Expanding Circle", where English is spoken as a foreign language, Lengeling and Pablo (2012) found that for NELTs, fewer educational qualifications such as teaching experience, were demanded and NELTs were offered more benefits. They further reported young NELTs gained more popularity in job recruitment.

Similarly, another study about the discrimination towards NNELT was conducted in an EFL context by means of questionnaires. Tatar (2019)[26] studied the employment criteria for hiring English teachers in a Turkey primary and middle schools. He found that school administrators attributed more to the notion of native speakerism when hiring teachers. He reported that administrators admitted that local teachers performed better in teaching methodology while expatriate teachers were better at language use.

Discrimination towards NNELTs can also been found in the area of online job advertisements. Mahboob and Golden (2013) [19]reported that NNELTs have been discriminated against in the online job recruitment advertisement in the Central Asia and the Middle East. Ruecker & Ives (2015)[25] conducted an analysis of fifty-nine online recruitment advertisements specifically looking at the language used in the ads recruiting English teachers from some Asian countries, they reported the findings that the ideal English teacher wanted was " a young, white, enthusiastic native speaker of English from a stable list of inner-circle countries." The description of the positions in those advertisements for NELTs focused more on benefits, such as money-making, exotic experience than requirements for professionalism or related teaching experience. The authors made an appeal to teachers to fight against the principle of "native speaker and white privilege".

Although many studies highlight the issue of unequal employment of NNELTs and NELTs in hiring, these studies mainly focus on major cities in America, the UK and some Asian countries. Few have been done in less developed places. For example, some second tier cities in China, where there is a larger population of NNELTs and finding a job is usually considered much easier than first tier cities in China. Furthermore, studies examining the issue of NNELT/NELT recruitment usually take the form of questionnaires and interviews. And the online recruitment ads are getting more popular. However, few studies have been carried out to explore this issue in online ads through content analysis. Due to the fact that China doesn't have official well-established recruitment standards to hire English teachers, what criteria are used by school administrators and what job employment scene is in Chinese context is worthy of being explored

Thus far, to address the gap, this research will investigate how online recruitment advertisements approach the issue of NELT/NNELT hiring in a second tier city – Xi'an, China. A content analysis method will be adopted to address the following research questions:

(1)Among a sample of Xi'an employers' online ads to recruit International English language teachers, what are the stated requirements regarding native speaker status?

(2)Except for the native speaker status, what other criteria do these employers focus on in their ads to recruit native English speaker teachers?

3. Methodology

3.1. Context

Figure 1: eChinacities   *Figure 2: Bosszhipin*

This research focused on online job advertisements posted on two popular websites famous websites

(see figure 1 & figure 2): eChinacities (see https://jobs.echinacities.com/) and bosszhipin (see http://www.bosszhipin. com/) by means of content analysis.

There are a small number of websites particularly aimed at recruiting international English teachers in China. The most popular one is eChinacities. The website eChinacites has a sub-website named eChinajobs, which is the leading job site for foreigners in China. This is a professional online platform which provides international teachers and students with updated employment opportunities for both full time and part-time including English language teaching, sales and research jobs in China. Job seekers view the recruitment postings, submit their CVs and get interviews. Another website named Bosszhipin is the largest mobile recruiting online platform in China, with a rich database of domestic recruitment advertisements and also has its own online recruitment app. It has users coming from more than 350 cities in China and 17 workplaces in cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Xi'an, Bosszhipin takes a "direct recruitment" model where job seekers can view job postings, submit their CVs, and directly communicate with the employers through the online chatting mode and through Wechat. The rationale behind my examination of the two websites is to investigate to what extent the Native Speaker criteria exists in the two boards:one especially designed for international teachers and the other commonly used by Chinese job seekers.

Xi'an is a Tier 2 city in China where the development of English education is less advanced than that of first tier cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Only in recent decades,international schools and institutions have expanded rapidly and there is a growing need for foreign English teachers. There are two sources of English teachers in China: local English teachers and foreign English teachers. There are two management systems where they are recruited and treated differently. Thus, this research focuses on non-native English teachers within the foreign English teachers group in Xi'an.

3.2. Method

This research uses content analysis method used to identify patterns in online job advertisement. Content analysis can be applied to a wide range of texts and fields including media studies, anthropology and cognitive science. It can be used to "quantify the occurrence of certain words, phrases, subjects or concepts "in a set of texts. It has advantages of collecting data unobtrusively and is transparent and replicable by following a systematic analysis procedure (Luo, 2019)[18].

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

The use of online data provided an easy access to collecting data by key word search and sorting data by date. Recruitment ads were collected from both databases (N=92 for eChinacities; N=37 for Bosszhipin) with a date range from Jan 1st, 2020, to April 24th, 2020. Any job advertisement with a location other than Xi'an was excluded. And any job advertisements for positions other than English language teachers were excluded. The advertisements that were published more than once were counted as a single advertisement. Each advertisement was listed in an excel sheet in WPS2019. Each advertisement was coded for the following aspects: title for position, level, nature of school (private or governmental), nativeness as a job qualification for employment (e.g. "native speakers only"; "US and UK preferred"), educational background, teaching experience, and teaching certification. The online data made a second check easy to ensure there was no missing data during the analysis. The content analysis was conducted both quantitatively and qualitatively. Content analysis is an objective and reliable method because following clear directions, data is grouped and categorized (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018)[6].

4. Findings & Discussion

The total number of recruiting advertisements was 37 for Bosszhipin and 92 for eChinacities, located by key word and date search. Any posting out of range or unrelated was discarded. There remained 17 in Bosszhipin and 12 in eChinacities for the current research .Compared with recruitment for local English teachers, the number of recruitment advertisements was very small in both websites. On the one hand, it showed the online access for international English teachers to teach English was limited in Xi'an; On the other, it revealed that the landscape of current English education in Xi'an was a less international city with a small number of international teachers needed

4.1. Title

There was no unified title for recruitment advertisements in both websites (n=29). As shown in Figure 3, 72.5% of the advertisements emphasized the context – either English teacher or foreign teachers. There were 7 advertisements at 24.1% titled ESL, which revealed the wrong label of English in China and misunderstanding about foreign English teachers. English should be categorized as foreign language rather than second language. ESL refers to English which is usually taught to students in an English-speaking country (e.g. U.S), whereas EFL is English as a foreign language in foreign, non-English-speaking countries such as China and Japan (Dunsmore, 2019)[9]. Apparently, the title should be corrected as EFL. The misconception proved the employers were weak in basic English language knowledge and further revealed English education was behind in the international development in Xi'an. Some stressed the institution such as "training center" "international kindergarten" and "Sesame Street". Some included specific titles, such as "oral teachers". However, there was one advertisement titled "Native English teacher", which attached great importance to native English teachers and disadvantaged the nonnative English teacher at the first glance. Also, teachers' professionalism was devalued in the title because there were no advertisements that highlighted the teachers' professional requirement in the ad title.
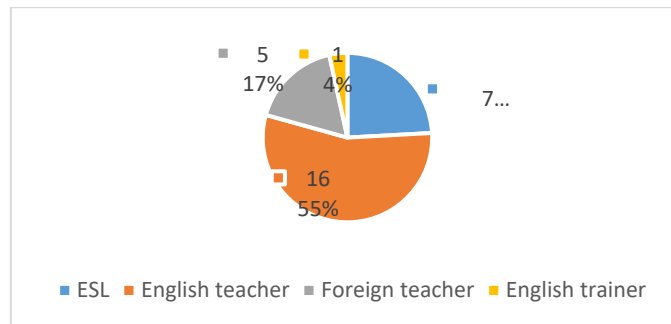

Figure 3: Division of Title of Online Recruitment Advertisements.

4.2. Level

The pie chart (Figure 4) illustrates the proportion of institutions at different educational levels in online job recruitment in the two websites in total. Overall, the most significant two types of institutions were institutions aimed at students from kindergarten and institutions covering English teaching students from kindergarten level to middle school levels. In contrast, institutions that targeted students from universities and adult English teaching compromised around 3%. And institutions covering English teaching to students in kindergarten and elementary schools accounted for 17%.
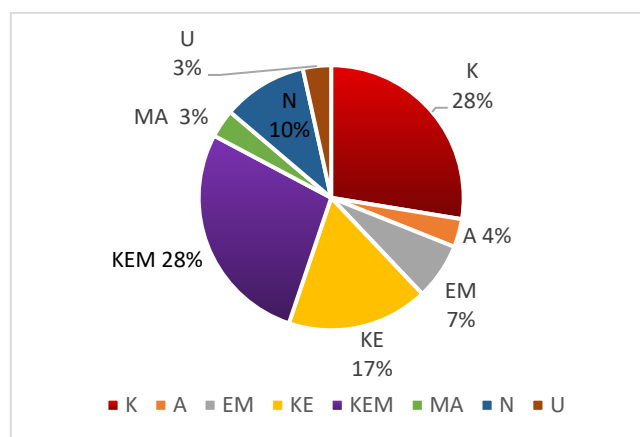
Note:k=kindergarten
A=adult education EM=elementary+middle school
KE=kindergarten+elementary KEM=kindergarten+elementary+middle school
MA=middle school+adult education
U=university   N=no mention

Figure 4: Division of Level of Online Recruitment Institutions.

A large number of advertisements, which accounted for 73% of the total advertisements, were posted by institutions that focused specifically on kindergarten level, which showed that foreign English teachers were in great need for young childre's English education in Xi'an. There was a widely accepted educational concept that English education should start as a earlier stage as possible, in kindergarten and in the first or second year in elementary school (Ikegashira, et al. 2009)[13]. And foreign English teachers were supposed to provide students with an authentic English-speaking environment. After all, by employing more foreign English teachers, those institutions can be more competitive and international so as to attract more students.

4.3. Types of Online Recruitment Bodies

As Figure 5 illustrates, all of the 29 advertisements were posted by private educational institutions and agencies and none were posted by public schools, which showed the foreign English teachers were in great need in most private educational institutions compared with public schools. This can be accounted for by the Chinese hiring and teaching context in Xi'an. There are mainly two types of schools and institutions in Xi'an: the government-run public schools; and private educational institutions and agencies. The current situation of public schools is that there are mostly local teachers with few foreign teachers. Employers in public sectors prefer to post job advertisements in their school official websites. In contrast, private English institutions use the popular recruiting websites more.
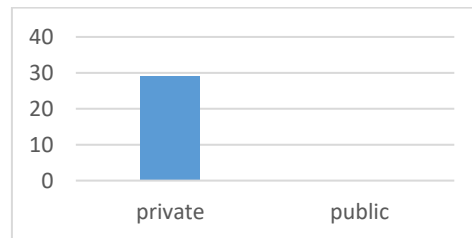

Figure 5 : Types of Online Recruitment Bodies.

4.4. Native Speakerism as a Job Requirement

The result indicated that more than half of the advertisements used the native speakerism criteria for recruiting their prospective English teachers, which accounted for 62% of the total advertisements as seen in Figure 6. This revealed that the preference for NELTs is still dominant in the job market in Xi'an. In other words, apparently, the NNELTs are still being discriminated against.
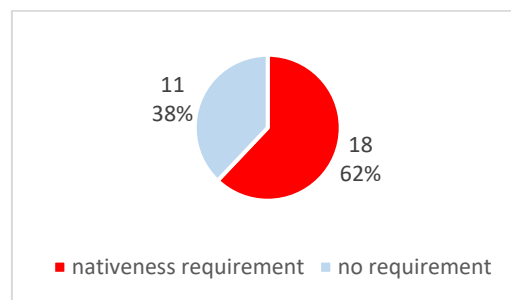

Figure 6: Division of Nativeness as a Job Requirement.

To further investigate, the native speakerism criteria has been narrowed by proposing qualification terms in four aspects (see Figure 7). The number of advertisements having specific discrimination terms was 9. There were five advertisements that referred to specific locations of teachers' origin. For example, one advertisement said "Native English Teachers/of Native Level English. The one who is from Britain, America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand will be preferred." In addition, there were two ads clearly emphasizing strict passport restrictions. For example, "Passport holder of UK, The USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, ZA". Some had a specific pronunciation preference —"Native speakers with great pronunciation (American, British, Canadian and Australian are preference)". There was only one advertisement requiring female only.
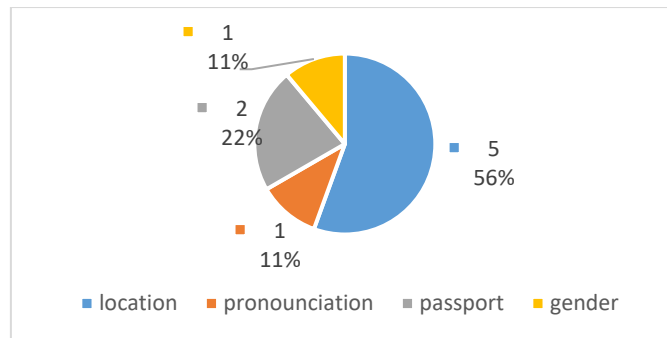
Figure 7: Specific Discriminatory Terms Advertisements

A total of 62% advertisements used native speakerism as their recruitment criteria. And there were 9 out of 29 (31% of the total advertisements) having specific discriminatory terms. This analysis showed that discriminatory recruitment towards NNELTs was still serious in the online job market in Xi'an.

4.5. Educational Background

Advertisements were also coded for a very important recruitment requirement -educational background. As Figure 8 shows, 90% of the ads required at least a bachelor's degree. However, there were still 10% with no requirement for any educational degree. Ironically, none of the advertisements with discriminatory traits had specific major requirements. Some advertisements clearly stated requirements like: "bachelor's degree or above no requirements on major". However, a bachelor's degree was the minimum requirement for obtaining a teacher degree. And requirements for teaching as a profession should include a degree in education or a major in the subject they want to teach (Christiane, 2020)[4]. Therefore it should be the case with English teaching in Xi'an. However, the result showed that when hiring foreign English teachers, teaching professionalism was devalued or even neglected.
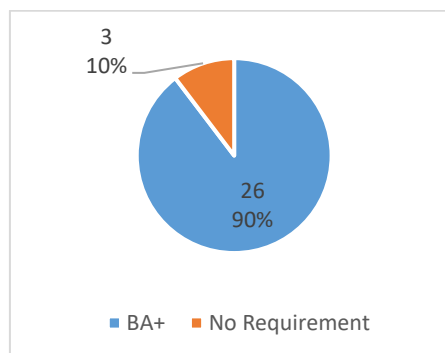

Figure 8: Educational Background Requirement in Advertisements

4.6. Teaching Experience and Teaching Certification

Teaching experience and qualification are two important requirements in hiring an English teacher. In terms of teaching experience, the result illustrated that 27.6% of the advertisements didn't put forward requirement for teaching experience, and 13.8% of the advertisements made vague requirement for the teaching experience like "English teaching experience for young children is preferred". The rest (58.6%) required at least one year teaching experience, among which there were 11 job advertisements requiring two years teaching.

As for the teaching certification, there were 76% advertisements including certification requirements, though it varied in terms used, such as TEFL, TESL and Tesol, which proved that job employers placed importance on teaching certifications.

5. Conclusion

Based on the online recruitment advertisements, this study investigated the NELT/NNELT issue in the job hiring market in Xi'an by means of content analysis. Unfortunately, the result showed that native

speakerism is still an important hiring criteria and multifaceted discrimination towards NNELTs is still dominant in the foreign English teacher market in Xi'an. In addition, apart from nativeness as a criteria, more than half of employers also attach importance to teaching experience and certificates. However, there is no focus on teaching professionism in term of education major or subjects, which should be given much weight to the future.

In a nutshell, in today's world,does it really matter about being a NELT or NNELT in job hiring? Of course not. It is the teaching professionalism that should be considered in recruitment.

Acknowledgment

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