



Shorter Article

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Corresponding authors:

Michael Chesnut;
Email: michael.chesnut@hufs.ac.kr

Privilege and discrimination in English teachers' figured worlds

Michael Chesnut  and Trevor Schmitt

College of English, Independent Researcher, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Dongdaemun-gu, Korea

Introduction

'Hello Katie, I am sorry to inform you that my client does not hire Irish people due to the alcoholism [sic] nature of your kind.' (Fox News, November 10, 2014)

The above message, sent to an Irish woman applying to teach English in South Korea in 2014 and shared widely in the media (Fox News, November 10, 2014; McCauley, 2014; Taylor, 2014) demonstrates that issues of nationality can shape the hiring of 'foreign' English teachers in East Asia. To better understand these issues, this study examines Irish English-language teachers' experiences and understandings of seeking employment in Korea through interviews with six Irish English-language teachers who taught in Korea. Only one teacher explicitly stated he was discriminated against on the basis of being Irish, with three others discussing discrimination in ways which avoided explicitly taking a position regarding discrimination against Irish English-language teachers. Two participants explicitly stated they never experienced discrimination on the basis of being Irish, but surprisingly also discussed experiences in which their employment opportunities were limited due to being Irish. Additionally, certain aspects of Irish English and the desire in Korea for American English and American curriculum were identified as potential limitations on Irish English-language teachers' employment opportunities in Korea.

English language teaching in Korea

For decades, thousands of foreign English teachers have been employed in Korea for the purposes of English language teaching (Jeon & Lee, 2006), with Irish English-language teachers constituting a small minority of these teachers. Table 1 (Ministry of Justice, Korean Immigration Service, 2022) lists the number of E-2 language teaching visas issued to citizens of those countries permitted to teach English in Korea, showing the limited number of Irish English-language teachers employed in Korea.

The foundation of the recruitment and employment of these teachers is the 'native speaker fallacy' (Phillipson, 1992: 185) or an ideology of 'native-speakerism' (Holliday, 2006), which posits that native English speaker teachers are a superior means of accessing English and 'western' culture, and a source of superior teaching methods. For decades, this ideology has been extensively critiqued in a variety of ways: there is little evidence native-English speaker teachers are better than non-native English speaker teachers (Canagarajah, 1999; Levis et al., 2016); students may not desire to model their English on a native-speaker, (Choi, 2016), and one cannot be a native speaker of an imagined or idealized 'standard English', but only a speaker of one particular variety of English, which may or may not be viewed as a 'native variety' (Moussu & Llorca, 2008: 317); with significant additional criticisms made by others (Cook, 1999; Davies, 2003; Kramsch, 1997; Paikeday, 1985). Additionally, native-speakerism also links authority over English with whiteness (Jenks & Lee, 2020; Lan, 2022; Ruecker & Ives, 2015) through an idealized image of a white native-English speaker teacher. The racialized construction of the idealized native English speaker is reinforced through both advertising towards students and the recruitment of teachers (Ruecker & Ives, 2015) as well as teaching practices (Charles, 2019; Choe & Seo, 2021; Gerald, 2020), with the connection between whiteness and English further marginalizing racialized English-language teachers. In response to the continuing prevalence of native-speakerism, the non-native English speaker teacher movement has worked towards

Table 1. Number of E-2 language teacher visa holders by nationality as of June 30, 2022

Nationality	Number of E-2 Language Teacher Visa Holders
United States of America	7,234
South Africa	2,265
The United Kingdom	1,953
Canada	1,113
Australia	288
Ireland	263
New Zealand	147

fostering equality in English language teaching and addressing the negative impact of native-speakerism (Kamhi-Stein, 2016); however, within Korea native-speakerism continues to shape English language teaching to a tremendous degree (Jenks, 2017; Jenks & Lee, 2020). Within this study we adopt the perspective that native speaker status is something achieved, produced, or recognized within particular contexts (Aneja, 2016a, 2016b; Piller, 2002) and is often related to one's race and citizenship (Curran, 2020; Panaligan, & Curran, 2022), rather than an objective scientific status.

There now exists substantial scholarly work examining Irish English (Barron & Schneider, 2011; Filppula, 2002; Hickey, 2007; O'Keeffe & Amador Moreno, 2009; Vaughan & Clancy, 2011) including scholarship on attitudes regarding Irish English (Diskin, & Regan, 2017; Margić, & Širola, 2014). Hickey (2007: 22) argues that 'many Irish have an ambivalent attitude to English' given that Irish rather than English is seen as the carrier of national culture and that Irish English can be seen as a lesser form of English even within Ireland. It is possible these attitudes shape the understandings of some Irish English-language teachers in Korea, even if other research shows that Irish English speakers view Irish English as attractive (Coupland & Bishop, 2007: 80; Diskin & Regan, 2017: 192). A limited amount of research has examined English language learners' attitudes towards Irish English or Irish speakers of English (Ahn & Kang, 2017; Diskin & Regan, 2017; Margić & Širola, 2014), with some finding learners have negative attitudes towards Irish English (Ahn & Kang, 2017; Choe & Lee, 2023; Diskin & Regan, 2017: 200) and others more positive attitudes (Margić & Širola, 2014: 51), with Choe and Lee (2023) finding learners in Korea generally view American and Canadian speakers of English most positively. Within this study, we posit that whichever particular variety of English is spoken by an English language teacher is irrelevant to the overall quality and capability of that teacher, and that all teachers, regardless of language background, must adapt their teaching and communication practices to local contexts. Ultimately, 'while we cannot conclude that there is a thriving cohort of learners of Irish English, there are a lot of English language teachers who are Irish around the world and there are a lot of learners who come to Ireland to learn English' (O'Keeffe, 2011: 63), highlighting the value of examining Irish English-teachers' employment experiences.

Methodology

We conducted individual interviews with five Irish teachers, and drew upon interviews done with one additional Irish English-language teacher, the teacher known as CS, which were completed as part of a previous study done by one author (Chesnut, 2016). All teachers have been given two-letter pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. All the teachers discussed within this paper were recruited via the authors' friends and acquaintances, with care was taken to recruit teachers from different social groups (see Table 2 for additional details regarding participants).

Each participant was interviewed once in order to understand their perspective on seeking employment as an Irish English-language teacher, with the exception of CS who participated in three interviews as she was involved in an earlier larger study (Chesnut, 2016). We adopted the ethnographic interviewing practices of Spradley (1979: 58), understanding our interviews 'as a series of friendly conversations into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants to respond as informants' which have the explicit purpose of better understanding participants' perspectives. Interview elements included expressing ignorance regarding issues related to employment as an English teacher in Korea in order to elicit participants' understandings of this phenomenon (Spradley, 1979: 61); the use of grand tour questions related to finding employment as an English teacher in Korea; asking mini-tour questions, meaning 'a descriptive question that asks the informant to describe some smaller unit of an event or activity' (Spradley, 1979: 63) usually based upon something a participant said; asking structural questions about how the process of seeking employment works for some teachers (Spradley, 1979: 60); asking contrast questions regarding differences among foreign English teachers or teaching positions (Spradley, 1979: 60); and asking questions about the language participants would use to discuss seeking employment (Spradley, 1979: 65).

These interviews were transcribed, read carefully to determine what issues were discussed, and then coded for their content and emergent themes. Analysis was done through this process of coding and contextualizing data (LeCompte, 2000) and the writing of analytic memos (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007: 150), with the process of writing itself proving to be an effective means of examining this data (Richards, 2000).

Within this paper we draw upon the concept of figured worlds (Holland et al., 2001) to analyze how these teachers shape understandings of themselves and the world. Figured worlds are the collectively shared and interconnected stories, constructed through characters and artifacts, such as an ideal teacher or a perfect curriculum, that help construct meanings and orientations to one's life. Additionally, we draw upon Appleby's (2013) work on how being a native English speaker teacher is embodied, not achieved, and therefore aspects of success and privilege derived from this status are regarded with less value or concern than aspects of oneself that are achieved through effort.

Table 2. Participants

Name	Age	Gender	Type of Employment	Educational Background	Number of Years in Korea
CS	Late twenties	Female	Public School	Undergraduate degree	2
JY	Mid to late twenties	Male	Academy	Undergraduate degree	2
BZ	Mid-forties	Male	Public School	Postgraduate diploma	Over 10
KL	Late twenties	Male	Public School	Undergraduate degree	1
TH	Early twenties	Male	Academy	Postgraduate diploma	1
NA	Late twenties	Male	Public School	Postgraduate diploma in TESOL	Over 5

Understandings of discrimination against Irish teachers in Korea

Overall, participants did not extensively discuss the topic of discrimination against Irish English-language teachers when asked. NA explicitly stated discrimination towards Irish English-language teachers exists in Korea, 'on the job description it says North American only. There is discrimination towards Irish teachers being hired'. He also discussed how he believes Korean employers value accent and nationality over experience and qualifications, and wondered whether the stereotype of Irish people as excessive consumers of alcohol could have limited his employment opportunities in Korea. To a greater degree than any other participant, NA stated Irish teachers face discrimination in Korea, even while other teachers related similar understandings. TH spoke briefly about one experience in which he felt being Irish was significant.

TH: I got one recurring job offer and what really put me off was my recruiter and how much he pushed me to take this job. It was in a town of 200,000 people in Korea which in Korea is tiny. And he kept pushing saying it was a great opportunity for you. Almost kind of insinuating you are an Irish man, you are not going to get something good.

TH also discussed how his initial attempt to find employment as an English teacher in Korea through a recruiter was difficult and shared what his recruiter conveyed about seeking employment in Korea.

TH: You're Irish and the hierarchy is Americans, Canadians, and then everyone else, there's not really a four, five, six, so that's kind of it. You're either from one of the good ones or from one of the bad ones, that's kind of the impression I get.

In these statements TH shared his understanding that he is disadvantaged due to being Irish in a manner he found objectionable, but notably TH would not explicitly state this is a form of discrimination.

Interviewer: Do you think there is a bias against Irish teachers in Korea?

TH: There's definitely not a preference anyway, I don't know if there is a bias against Irish people, but definitely there is a preference for American people or Canadian people.

TH felt he was being pressured to accept a less desirable employment offer because he is Irish and understood a hierarchy exists among foreign English teachers in Korea in terms of employment that marginalizes Irish English-language teachers (see Choe & Lee, 2023). However, he avoided directly referring to this as a bias or discrimination against Irish English-language teachers, unlike NA.

KL reported that he was never asked about being Irish in job interviews and seemed reluctant to discuss the issue of discrimination against Irish teachers in Korea, but did respond when asked whether a school would prefer hiring an Irish or North American teacher, saying, 'I would say based on the standard of English that's used which is North American or American English. I would say they would probably prefer to hire a US citizen or a North American', and would further discuss that textbooks and materials are American. CS would likewise discuss issues of preferences regarding English varieties and accents, but did not discuss discrimination regarding Irish teachers in Korea, and was not asked about this issue directly in her interviews.

JY and BZ both explicitly stated that being Irish had little impact on their employment as foreign English teachers in Korea. JY, discussing his employment, stated 'anything that happened, I never thought it was because of nationality, I can't recall anything like that.' Similarly, BZ discussed both his success finding employment as a foreign English teacher and the lack of discrimination he believed he experienced, 'I've never had a problem and always gotten a job I went for. Never been discriminated against because I'm Irish'. However, both would also discuss experiences and understandings in which being Irish significantly limited their employment opportunities as an English teacher in Korea, with BZ stating 'I still see American and Canadian only jobs being offered', and JY discussing how one employer was initially reluctant to hire an Irish English-language teacher, only doing so after failing to hire a North American teacher and having a current American teacher vouch for JY as a teacher.

All teachers interviewed for this study discussed experiences in which being Irish shaped and, in many cases, limited their employment opportunities in Korea, but these teachers narrated these experiences in critically different ways. In some cases, they voiced multiple or seemingly contradictory understandings within the same

relatively short interview, suggesting multiple narratives are shaping the figured worlds of Irish English-language teachers in Korea.

Irish English as problematic, American English as the standard

Several participants discussed how Irish English is problematic within English language teaching in Korea. JY said 'he [the employer] was worried the students wouldn't understand what I was saying' followed by 'which is a valid concern'. KL discussed his accent in a similar manner:

KL: I worked in tourism and hospitality for quite some time before I came over here so I kind of perfected to neutralize my accent. Because if I spoke with my strong Dublin accent people wouldn't have an F-ing clue what I was talking about. So, I haven't really gotten any comments on my accent.

BZ would similarly say 'my accent is not that strong either', when discussing his English. CS discussed both her English and the English of another Irish woman who taught in Korea in similar ways:

CS: She still says 'R' [voicing an 'Irish-R'] and the way we pronounce some other words like house, and her accent is stronger than me, so I can't do it, but it's much stronger, so the students wouldn't really listen that much.

Within this excerpt a 'stronger accent' is positioned as a problematic aspect of some teachers' English, so much so that it can create classroom problems. Additionally, CS discussed an experience involving employment and a potential employer's concern over her English.

CS: They [Korean teachers] were really worried when I went to my elementary school because the native teacher before was American and he told them Irish people are pretty hard to understand and they're very funny, so, they were really worried and then one of my [future Korean] coworkers tried to listen to Irish radio but she made a mistake and she listened to the Irish-language radio [laughter].

She further explained that any concerns over her English were assuaged once CS spoke with her colleagues. She would also tell a story of having an American teacher evaluate her accent on behalf of another potential Korean employer: '[Y]eah, they wanted to, yeah, the Korean professor asked him [a senior foreign English teacher] to contact me just to check my accent'. In narrating her experiences CS laughed and was not overly concerned about mistaken assumptions made by potential employers or having her English evaluated by an American teacher. In fact, CS, JY, KL, and BZ all narrated stories of themselves which featured the existence of a problematic Irish speaker of English whose language renders them less capable of teaching English in Korea, without any major concern over this issue.

NA discussed his language in a similar manner but linked the Irish accent with issues of discrimination, treating this as a more serious issue rather than something humorous or unimportant.

NA: The Irish pronunciation is quite different, so I had to change it a bit. Change the way I spoke. It made it more difficult to get jobs, because a lot of the jobs, a lot of the better jobs just want Americans or North Americans to teach so we're not as privileged as them when job searching [Pause] it was just for job searching, that the main thing [it] was annoying cause you have five years' teaching experience and you are qualified and just because someone is Canadian or American with no experience, they will get the job before you. They are pretty prejudiced against Irish accents.

NA narrates his understanding of Irish English with the same fundamental assumption that some varieties or aspects of Irish English are not suitable for teaching in Korea, while adopting a significantly different position regarding the meaning of this issue overall.

TH's experiences and understandings are different. TH said, 'the American accent is just so ingrained', however, he further said, 'whenever they [Korean people] comment on my accent it's always positive. They'll never really comment on other teachers' accents'. He further said, 'I've never heard of anyone having to whitewash themselves. Not whitewash the Irishness. I'd imagine they've been asked to conform to the American standard. That's understandable in terms of spelling and pronunciation. It's more curriculum based.' TH discussed his accent and Irish English more generally in a unique way, highlighting how his English was viewed positively, and how an American standard in Korea necessitated some changes in the way Irish English-language teachers communicate. While TH discussed Irish English in a unique manner, he along with all participants in this study positioned some varieties or some aspects of Irish English as less suitable for English language teaching in Korea.

Narrating oneself as qualified to teach English in Korea

Several participants discussed experiences in which they were evaluated in terms of employability as English-language teachers. CS discussed learning potential employers had attempted to listen to Irish radio to assess her as a potential teacher and being asked to speak with an American English-language teacher in order to evaluate her English. In fact, in discussing the way they speak English and problematic aspects of some Irish speakers, NA, CS, JY, KL, and BZ all positioned their English as one of their main qualifications for employment as English-language teachers in Korea.

JY and KL would go further and link their employability with being white. In terms of being seen as a native English speaker or being employable in Korea, both discussed how being white is important.

Interviewer: Basically, [has anyone] questioned you as a native speaker?

JY: I think I'm pretty pasty, pretty pasty, as a lot of Irish people are, yeah, some people are like, you are so white.

In this brief excerpt JY responds to being questioned about being a native English speaker by referencing being white, with that assuring his status in that regard. KL discussed this idea as well.

KL: From what I know, a far bigger issue than nationality is, say if you're applying to be an English teacher and you're from a different country and have a different skin color, that is a far bigger issue because I think that as far as fluency is concerned if you're white they assume you're fluent, they assume you're a native speaker.

KL more directly than JY, explicitly states that for Irish English-language teachers being white can assure one is seen as a native English speaker in Korea (see Jenks & Lee, 2020; Lan, 2022; Ruecker & Ives, 2015). Being white and having an appropriate accent or variety of English are understood to be important aspects of being employable as a foreign English teacher for JY and KL.

Additionally, TH discussed the need to 'conform to the American standard' and the capacity to teach American culture along with American spelling was discussed by other participants as well.

Importantly, whiteness and one's own English are aspects of oneself that are primarily embodied. They are not qualities that are developed, cultivated, and nurtured through effort, even if some participants discuss adjusting their speech in some ways. Narrating oneself as being qualified as an English-language teacher due to embodied qualities shapes the larger figured world of being a foreign English teacher (Appleby, 2013) and how one understands issues such as discrimination in English language teaching.

Discussion and conclusion

For some Irish English-language teachers, such as JY, discrimination against Irish English-language teachers is understood to simply not occur. These teachers understand that being Irish positions them as qualified to teach English, even if at points some employers may prefer to hire other nationalities for certain positions. However, this is not seen as discrimination because overall the hiring process for all foreign English teachers is understood to rest upon an embodied quality within themselves (Appleby, 2013). As JY and KL note, being white along with being Irish is enough to successfully find employment as an English language teacher in Korea, rendering the idea that he could be discriminated against in the hiring process impossible, if not ridiculous. In other words, when one understands that such a large unearned and embodied aspect of oneself is a critical element in one's employment, discrimination is rendered nonsensical. For teachers who narrate a figured world incorporating this understanding of whiteness and native-speaker status within the narratives they tell themselves, stories of Korean teachers worrying about the English of Irish English-language teachers are seen as rather silly and humorous, rather than something worthy of concern, while for others this figured world makes discussions of discrimination against Irish English-language teachers uncomfortable or even unwelcome.

However, for other teachers, such as NA, an understanding that teachers should be valued on the basis of their skills, experience, and other qualities they have developed or achieved renders the belief that Irish English-language teachers are valued less for being Irish a more serious issue, enough so that NA explicitly labels this as

discrimination. Importantly, some teachers such as TH would ultimately be ambivalent over issues of discrimination against Irish English-language teachers in Korea, reflecting how distinct and contradictory narratives can be incorporated in still-being-developed figured worlds. Overall, this shows that narrating why one is capable of being employed as a teacher shapes perceptions of discrimination in seeking employment as a teacher, making some believe such discrimination does not exist and others believe it is a significant issue. This suggests that native speakerism can shape the narratives and figured worlds Irish English-language teachers construct about themselves in ways that are potentially problematic, limiting their interest and engagement in challenging unfair employment practices, for example.

Discourses of Irish English as lesser or problematic, as discussed by Hickey (2007: 22) for example, can be incorporated in figured worlds as well. Positing the existence of a problematic speaker of Irish English, whose 'strong accent' renders them less suitable to teach English in Korea, makes possible a narrative of oneself as a legitimate Irish English-language teacher whose English is well suited to teach in Korea. In other words, by constructing a narrative of a problematic Other, concerns over the legitimacy of Irish English or one's own speech can be mitigated and rendered moot. Importantly, it is the assumption that Irish English-language teachers must embody an unproblematic idealized English, rooted in native speakerism, that is foundational to the construction of this problematic Other. Similarly, a discourse positioning American English and American curriculum as the standard for Korea can be drawn upon to create a narrative in which one is a successful teacher by adapting to that standard and embodying a 'standard' English to a reasonable degree.

This study shows how even those teachers granted tremendous privileges by native speakerism can have employment opportunities limited and narratives of oneself constrained by this ideology. These findings are especially relevant to teacher training which seeks to challenge native speakerism and racist practices in English language teaching. While acknowledging non-native English speaker teachers are far more marginalized by native speakerism, an understanding that Irish English-language teachers are at points limited and constrained by this ideology can form the basis of new understandings and a collective solidarity that spans the harsh binary of the native-speaker non-native-speaker divide. Further, those attempting to challenge racist practices in English language teaching, may find new opportunities for solidarity and development in discussing how whiteness, while granting tremendous privileges to those who embody it, can limit and constrain the narratives told about teaching by white native-English-speaker teachers in ways that elide troubling aspects of their hiring and employment as teachers.

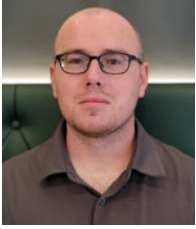
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MICHAEL CHESNUT is an associate professor at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (Hufs). His research interests include 'foreign' language teacher identity, the linguistic landscape, ways of incorporating linguistic landscape data and scholarship into language teaching, and second language writing pedagogy. Recent work in preparation includes an ongoing study examining multilingualism in the COVID-19 related linguistic landscape of Korea and additional research on the careers of foreign English teachers in Korea. Email: michael.chesnut@hufs.ac.kr



TREVOR SCHMITT is an Irish CELTA certified English language teacher based in Seoul, South Korea. He graduated with an MA in TESOL from University College Dublin with his thesis focusing on the insights of Korean ESL students in Ireland and their experiences adapting and learning English in a communicative classroom. He attained a BA double hon-our from NUI Maynooth. His research interests include blended

learning, communicative language learning, CLIL, online classrooms, and the use of social media for language learning.
Email: vonschmitt@gmail.com