

# An Investigation on the Enactment of Native-Speakerism on Social Media in China: A Critical Discourse Perspective

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**Abstract.** From a critical discourse perspective, this article explored how native-speakerism, the dominating ideology in the ELT community were enacted on the social media platforms of mainland China. ELT-related videos on two flourishing online video-sharing platforms, namely Douyin and Bilibili.com, were investigated with the use of language and the dynamics of power being focused. Findings from the study demonstrated the systematic influence of native-speakerism in the ELF community as well as the overwhelming power of native-speakers in terms of the issues regarding the authenticity and ownership of English.

**Keywords:** native-speakerism, ELT, social media, Critical discourse analysis, CDA

## 1. Introduction

Since English has become a recognized worldwide language, those who are conventionally defined as the majority of English-speaking people today are not native [1], problematizing the dichotomous as well as the ideologized notions of "native" and "non-native speaker" [2] in the discipline of teaching the English language (hereafter ELT). Correspondingly, attention in critical research on language education and acquisition has been drawn to the prevalence of native-speakerism, which, as Holliday worded [3], refers to the "the belief that 'native-speaker' teachers represent a 'Western culture' from which spring the ideals both of the English language and English language teaching methodology (p.385)". Following this trend, scholars have been investigating this specific language ideology and the effects it has brought to the discourses and practices in the ELT community. Moreover, with the flourishing of various platforms of social media (e.g, Youtube, Tiktok), people from diverse backgrounds have been actively participating in sharing ELT-related content, thus constructing a new norm of discourse. The influence of native-speakerism has also been expanded to the ELT discourse on social media. Therefore, more studies are expected for native-speakerism in social media discourse. Based on the framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA), the current study aims to explore how native-speakerism has been enacted through the use of language on two major video-sharing social media platforms in China (i.e. the Chinese version of Tik Tok and Bilibili.com).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. An Overview of Native-speakerism

Native-speakerism, as Holliday introduced, "is a pervasive ideology within ELT, characterized by the belief that 'native-speaker' teachers represent a 'Western culture' from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology" [3]. For the first time in English's history, compared to their native tongue, more individuals acquire it as a second language, and interactions in English include fewer and fewer first-language speakers overall [4]. Since the late 15th century, individuals have been acquiring English as a second language, where people used this language for commercial exchange, immigrating and diplomacy.

Over the past century, English has transformed from a foreign language to a universal speech. It is most frequently spoken by speakers who did not acquire it as an L1 outside of the L1 countries (also known as "English as a Native Language" or EL countries) and the EL countries. As a result, as opposed to their original tongue, many people today utilize English as a second language. It differs greatly from other foreign languages like Spanish, Russian, and Japanese since they are still commonly taught for discourse with their monolingual speakers in the native-language country [4]. In such situations, individuals (most likely native English speakers) started to gradually raise the level of ESL and developed a tacit method to determine when ESL speakers' English "reached the level of native speakers." The criteria for each of them include grammar, syntax, morphology, and other elements. In light of the aforementioned predicament, some more forward-thinking applied linguists have begun to wonder who has the authority to determine the criteria by which usage is to be judged in the English language. Nobody questions the "right" of alleged "native speakers" to set their own guidelines of discourse with other "native speakers" (ENL) and even "non-native speakers" (EFL). The essential problem, though, is who should make these decisions for English as a lingua franca, or merely communication between "non-native speakers"? [4] In Jenkins' perspective, "For many years, it has been claimed that 'native speakers' do not possess IEL" [4]. English is referred to be an international language, but it is really more commonly thought of as a global language that may be freely and impartially utilized by all parties and persons as needed. Although it is true that a language's historical and cultural history is priceless and distinctive. However, as was already established, English is not the native tongue of every nation. Even in the modern era, when English is divided into several dialects (mostly British and American English), it is difficult to argue that a language belongs to a single culture. Exclusiveness and specificity were never intended by the language from the outset. Therefore, most individuals do not understand the conceptual difference between the so-called "native" and "non-native." For people who "are multilingual but not in English," Jenkins [4] proposes the term "non-bilingual English speakers." Jenkins likes the concept that the norm is changed from "monolingual" to "bilingual" to get around the difficulties of the native-non-native speaker dilemma. English speakers who are "multilingual" and "monolingual," according to Jenkins, are different. She acknowledges, however, that this distinction has too many undefined regions [5]. The primary objective is to emulate as nearly as possible a native speaker of the approved language. English proficiency and cultural identity are unrelated. It serves more as a portfolio for someone's academic and language-learning skills. Therefore, claiming that a Spanish speaker's rendition of English is in Spanish is not flattering. It would be a sign that their command of the language lacked some quality [6]. A mindset that fosters new relationships is required to eradicate native-speakerism. In the conclusion of Holliday [5], it is stated that major professional discourses must be set aside in order to understand students and colleagues from non-English-speaking Western countries, and native-speakerism must be confronted at the degree of prejudices present in everyday practise [3].

People studying foreign languages have started to pay greater attention to the teachers in recent years, among them whether they are local users of the language being taught. Foreign language learning and training have typically been based on the gap among native and non-native speakers [7]. Native English speakers have an advantage over non-native speakers and are generally considered to be at the top of the English language skill scale globally. Native speakers have a high level of trust from non-native speakers. The expectation is that non-native speakers would imitate the vocabulary, syntax, idioms, and culture of the native speaker [7]. The majority of individuals believe that a linguistic context is better for learning a foreign language than general learning techniques. NESTs could have an easier time in an EFL context, but they would suffer in an ESL environment [8]. In Medgyes' book, in comparison to NNESTs, he observes that NESTs employ actual English and do so with greater assurance. [7]. This assertion is refuted by Rampton [9], who emphasises that one need not be a native speaker to speak their mother tongue fluently. Language proficiency is not always the same as language ownership. Despite these disadvantages, native speakers are nonetheless more in desire and favoured in the profession of teaching English [7]. Taiwan is one of the nations that has been rated utilising the expanding concentric circle idea, where English is largely spoken by

foreigners [7]. As a result of English being a worldwide language, Taiwan's Education department significantly altered its educational strategy. In 2001, English was included in the primary school curriculum. Since that time, English instruction has become a requirement for all pupils. Non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) continue to outnumber native English speakers in Taiwan's ESL/EFL environment (NESTs). Although there are more NNESTs than NESTs, the field of English education appears to prefer NESTs more [7]. However, the language one speaks and the language one teaches are very different. One element that is frequently forgotten is that knowing English should come more from "what you know" than "who you are" [7]. Thus, it appeared that the question "Who is a Qualified English Teacher?" was receiving a growing amount of interest beginning in the early 1980s. In the 1950s and 1960s, the grammar-translation method of language teaching largely dominated, and native speakers were granted a position that they may not have now. As language learners pay more attention than ever to their spoken talents, native speakers have been the favoured choice in Taiwan [7]. Because of the adulation, aspirations, and understanding of the power of native speakers, there is an unequal identity gap between native speakers and non-native speakers. The reality is much different, despite growing requests for greater equality between native and non-native educators [7]. Non-native English speakers who completed their postgraduate study in English-speaking countries have received significant prominence in these research [10]. Instead of seeing themselves as "multicompetent bilinguals, generation 1.5, multilinguals, or World Englishes... speakers," after participating in an MA TESOL degree or obtaining employment as NNESTs in the professional sector, they perceive themselves as members of a visible minority who are marginalised and have second-class status. [10]. Additionally, NNESTs lack the confidence to teach English, despite the fact that many linguistic courses for NNESTs exclusively focus on enhancing language proficiency on the assumption that doing so will make them more successful and assured instructors [10]. They believe that if NNESTs have English proficiency comparable to that of a native speaker, they will be able to transcend their inferior non-native identities [10]. Grammar translation and exam-based evaluation, according to Scovel [11], make it more challenging for ESL/EFL students to communicate in English [7].

## 2.2. CDA: Exploring the Power Relationships Underlying Discourses

The proposal of native-speakerism problematized the inequality and discrimination in the ELT community, caused by notions regarding native speakers as perfect or superior. To unpack this type of power relations through the use of language, critical discourse analysis (hereafter CDA) could be employed.

Bridging the theories of power and social structure with discourse, Fairclough [12,13] made the initial attempt to develop a critical and interdisciplinary approach to discourse analysis. One of the key notions, power, refers to "the social power of groups or institutions" and "hierarchies thus are built around relative positions of political, social or professional power [14]". One key premise of CDA is that the reproduction of power differentials is discursive and dynamic through discourses and practices. As another keyword of CDA, ideologies are considered to be both conveyed and developed through discourses for the legitimation of the power and dominance held by the more powerful group. Therefore, the major goal of conducting CDA is to deconstruct messages (from the powerful to the less powerful) to identify how they legitimize or reproduce dominant ideologies. Fairclough [13] has then raised a model of three dimensions for understanding discourse, including a. texts (specific linguistic choices that have been made); b. discourse techniques (the construction, dispensation, and utilization of wordings); c. societal customs (the discursive capacity associations and thesis); As a general guideline for CDA, van Dijk [15] raised three questions for researchers to consider when undertaking a critical approach:

How do large organisations influence the language and setting of public discourse?

What are the societal repercussions of such power rhetoric on less powerful groups' thoughts and behaviors? (p.475)

Wodak and Meyer [16] have mentioned some linguistic markers and categories that are worth

noticing during CDA, such as word order, local semantic moves, schematic organization, propositional structures, turn takings, repairs, and hesitation, argumentation strategies, references, etc. Since its introduction, CDA has been widely applied in the research of various forms of ideologies and the corresponding power relations, such as sexism and racism. In the field of ELT, researchers have been using this critical approach in the investigation of the reality in the community. By analyzing the EFL textbooks used in China critically, Xiong and Qian [17] pointed out the English beliefs that are questionable, i.e., the materials' judicious use of English and syntactic lexicography. Ahn [18] conducted CDA on the contextualization cues in the interaction during an English classroom uploaded to YouTube, detecting a high level of anxiety among learners about pronunciation.

It is somehow unexpected that the application of CDA in studies on native-speakerism remains to be limited, considering that native-speakerism is one of the dominant ideologies in ELT. Exceptions include the research by Lee and Kim [10] introduced above and a critical study on ESL teacher recruitment advertisements by Ruecker and Ives [19]. After critically analyzing both textual and visual cues that construct the rhetorical structure of ESL teacher recruitment advertisements on websites based in Asia, Ruecker and Ives [19] identified the features of the ideal candidates demanded and the common structures of these advertisements, showing the White normality and native superior over professional qualification as English teachers. Nowadays, the online ELT community has been growing larger and larger. Because of this, the current study seeks to determine how native-speakerism is implemented in the ELT discourse on social media in mainland China using CDA, focusing on how language choices and organised discourses were used to materialise and strengthen the discursive power dynamics between native speakers and non-native speakers.

### 3. Data Collection and Analysis

Two major video-sharing forums that have been gaining increasing popularity in mainland China have been selected for data collection. The first is the Chinese version of Tiktok, Douyin, where people upload short-form videos. The second platform is a video-sharing website, Bilibili.com, where users (the “uploaders”) can upload their videos and view content shared by others. Like YouTube, these two video-sharing platforms likewise provide EFL learners in China with various types of content related to learning English.

As Wodak and Meyer [16] pointed out, in CDA, “no clear line between data collection and analysis can be drawn” (p.25). Thus the collection and analysis of the videos is overall a discursive procedure, through which we kept on discovering new flows of discourses. As for the first platform, while collecting our data on English teaching videos in Chinese TikTok (hereinafter referred to the original name as Douyin), we found out that there are plenty of videos expressing “false” concepts and misuse of English words and phrases, which two different video content are derived: transmission of content (or content being cracked down), and cracking down on video content. Based on this, we selected two groups of videos that were in the form of being cracked down (hereinafter referred to as A-side) versus cracking down (hereinafter referred to as B-side), and analyzed them using critical discourse analysis. To ensure anonymity, all account names mentioned below will be replaced by aliases.

The second platform examined in the study, Bilibili.com, is organized into categories (e.g., food, beauty), and the videos related to ELT are in the category of English, a subcategory of Knowledge. Videos under this category with the most views and likes have been examined according to the relevance to the research topic. After a few rounds of adding and removal, the ELT-related videos analyzed in the study had been categorized into three data sets:

Teaching “authentic” English: videos claiming that certain expressions used by Chinese learners are wrong while teaching alternative expressions;

Evaluating the English-speaking proficiency of celebrities;

Sharing experiences and suggestions for learning English.

The overall analytical procedure was informed by the literature in previous sections to offer possible answers to the questions raised by van Dijk [15].

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1. Native-speakersim in ELT-related discourse on Douyin

In the first group, the A-side video is from the account called “Zero”. The person in the video is a white woman, speaking both native American-accent English and Mandarin with an ordinary English accent. From this we may assume she is a native English speaker. In her video published on 2021.4.22, she proposed that “fruits are abusive words in colloquial”. She gave examples of her standpoint such as “You dropped the plates again, you LEMON (quote: useless thing)”, “Allysa’s going BANANAS again (quote: going crazy)”, and “Allysa, you PLUM (quote: fool)”. Following on the B-side video, it is from the account named “Andy”. He is a white man speaking American English, holding a TEFL International Certificate, and currently teaching in China. He commented that “I don’t think anyone would say this”. He clarified that the phrase “going banana” did exist, but it was an old phrase that people don’t tend to use currently, nowadays people use “going crazy”. And for the application of “lemon” and “plum”, he phone-called two of his friends, all of them proved that the sentences make no sense, the word “lemon” and “plum” does not mean anything. Based on the above, we can see that the uploader of A-Side takes advantage of the knowledge blind area of most people to publicize some false information. The A-Side speaker is a stereotypical white woman, which people tend to support native speakerism (thinking “they’ve been acquiring this language since birth, the words they say must be believable”), coupled with standard social media postings like “Don’t say that again” or “You know what? These words have other meanings”.

Upcoming the second group of data. The A-side video is from an account called “Box”. As we look through the account, the person appearing in the videos has changed from a white man into a Chinese man. The video we are using for analysis is hosted by a white man with a native American-accent. In the video uploaded on 2021.5.8, he argued that “don’t use the word ‘BECAUSE’ anymore, it’s too vulgar.” The phrases he suggested are “as a result of”, “on account of”, “due to” and “thanks to”. Similarly, the account “Zero”, which we mentioned in the previous data group, had also published a video on 2021.4.23 with the exact same copy, the same “Stop using ‘because’” opening, the same three alternatives, and the same content. Turning our focus to the B-side video, it is also from the account “Andy”. He mentioned that he uses “because” all day. In his perspective, “as a result of”, “on account of”, “due to” and “thanks to” tend to be more a written form, more formal and professional than “because”. Based on the above analysis, it can be seen that the biggest difference between the uploader of this group of A-Side and the previous group is that the content produced by him is not wrong. “As a result of”, “on account of”, “due to” and “thanks to” can indeed be used instead of “because”. But the substitutes mentioned above are mostly used in formal papers rather than daily communication. “Box” confuses the context of written language and everyday language by changing concepts, making many people think his content is correct at first sight.

From most people’s perspectives, the identity of a teacher is very important in English teaching and learning. People are more inclined to appreciate native speakers as instructors and think that they make for more persuasive lecturers. Being taught by native speakers has the clear, major benefit of having them know the language, in the eyes of the students. They are able to imitate its usage in a very natural way, and they can speak it fluently. Deep linguistic knowledge and high levels of skill may be beneficial for English language learners [20]. Because of this, among foreign language teachers, the status of native speakers is higher than that of non-native speakers, which leads to a higher discourse influencing power. Therefore, native speakers began to use their own identity and discourse power to earn traffic. According to Juez [14]:

*“As regards the relationship between power and discourse, then, critical discourse analysts take the following statements as axiomatic:*

*1. Access to specific forms of discourse, such as the discourses of politics, the media or science, is itself a power resource.*

*2. If we are able to influence people’s minds by exercising our power, we will indirectly control their actions.*

3. *Those groups who control most influential discourse also have more chances to control the minds and actions of others.*”

Influencing the subject may also lead to mind control since it can change how individuals see what information is important to include in messages or chats [14]. Let's apply Juez's points to the previous examples. First, "access to specific forms of discourse". The uploaders on A-Side, “Zero” and “Box” both chose to use the topic of "English" to form a powerful discourse. Secondly, "influence people's minds by exercising one's power", both “Zero” and “Box” are using the method of gaining attention with improper information to publicize or popularize some “unknown tips” of English and use the power of their identity as native speakers, to control the direction of public opinion and people's minds. Third, "Most influential discourse groups are more able to control minds and actions". We can say that “Andy” has more influencing power than “Zero” and “Box”, and have more ability to control public opinion and people's cognition of the information produced by A-Side uploaders so that many audiences who once believed in the words of “Zero” and “Box” changed their minds into believing “Andy”. It even indirectly influenced the audience to leave critical comments in the comments section of A-Side uploaders.

## 4.2. Native-speakersim in ELT-related discourse on Bilibili.com

### 4.2.1 The first set of data: real vs. fake English

Given the characteristics of the video-sharing platform, the titles of the videos tend to be made in a way that can attract potential viewers. Therefore, the linguistic choices made in the decision of titles could be analyzed for the underlying perceptions of the Uploaders about what could be valued by the potential viewers (in this case, the EFL learners in China). To provoke curiosity, the majority of the videos are titled starting with a question (*Do native speakers actually say...?; Are you still using...?*) or an imperative clause (*Stop saying...*), followed by a sentence encouraging the potential viewers to click on the video (*here are five authentic expressions that make you sound more native*) or with keywords like *Typical Chinglish* and *American/British Accent*. What is noticeable is the overwording of authentic and two Chinese words *Laowai* (lit. "old foreign", an informal term or slang for "foreigner") and *Waijiao* (lit. "foreign teacher", the NSET) to refer to the uploads themselves or native speakers of English that mainly represent “Western culture”, for example, “Could you be understood by *Laowai*?” and “How do *Laowai* think about...”. It demonstrated an intentional reinforcement of their foreignness, closely associated with the nativeness of English.

One particular type of video has gained special attention, which criticized typical expressions in Chinglish that Chinese EFL learners have learned from textbooks. They defined these features as “fake English” while providing expressions that the Uploaders claim to be more real, authentic, and “more like native”. One of the Uploaders from the US called all his friends (native speakers who were born and raised in the United States), asking them whether they use expressions frequently used by Chinese EFL learners (e.g, just so-so; What a pity). The word “strange” and “weird” showed up multiple times, demonstrating the power relationship, where authenticity is largely dependent on the native speakers’ instincts about language use. Although some of them did point out the intelligibility of these expressions, the video ended up with the conclusion by the Uploader that those expressions are “fake” English, reinforcing the power. The act of “ideological polarization” [14] by referring to the English used by native speakers as an absolute and perfect model whereas using the word “fake” or “weird” for the English by non-natives is a process of “othering” the less powerful groups.

### 4.2.2 The second set of data: what kind of accent is that?

Another popular type of video is the evaluation of the English speaking proficiency by celebrities. The Uploaders in this case all define themselves as native speakers. In these videos, they assessed the speaking ability of celebrities considering their pronunciation, grammar, and intonation. Like the first data set, the use of question forms, and the overwording of native speaker (Can...speak English like a native speaker?), *Laowai*, and *Waijiao*, were also reflected in the titles of this data set. What stood out this time is the topicalization of the word *Laowai* and *Waijiao* in almost all the titles of this type

of video, emphasizing their foreignness, and their credentials as teachers and native speakers while establishing the legitimacy of their evaluation practises. During the process, the Uploader paid intensive attention to the pronunciation of the celebrities and try to simply label their accent as American, British, or Chinese accent. The differential characteristics are regarded as erroneous and deficient, with comments like “that sounds weird”, and “that is different from the standard American English”. In most videos where the celebrities could speak fluently with a noticeable accent, the discourses in the video were mostly structured as follows: pointing out differential characteristics, describing these characteristics as errors, and informing the viewers about what the standard American accent sounds like by comparing their pronunciation with the celebrities’, and concluding the evaluation with a statement like “It’s nearly perfect, but just not really like native”. These linguistic choices and discourse structures may cause learners to pay too much attention to pronunciation and the devalued accent, thus increasing the level of anxiety [18].

#### 4.2.3 The third set of data: I have no overseas experiences

The last data set is composed of videos made by uploaders who define themselves as fluent non-native speakers of English. In the videos, most of them shared their learning experiences and tips in English, as a way of convincing the viewers. It is noticeable that almost all the uploaders emphasized the fact that they have no experience of studying abroad in English-speaking countries and one of them stated explicitly “I know my pronunciation is not perfect, but I have never studied overseas before”, as a way of avoiding criticism against her non-native accent. This phenomenon further reflected the overvaluation of native-like pronunciation and accent as shown in the previous two data sets.

## 5. Conclusion

Findings from the critical analysis of the ELT-related discourse on social media demonstrated the strong power of native-speakerism, with connection to issues including the definition of authenticity and the ownership of English. Apparently, under the systematic influence of native-speakerism, the native speakers still seem to hold control over authenticity and the ownership of English. However, in the reality of multilingualism, the authenticity of language should be interpreted context-dependently, relatively, and progressively [2]. Additionally, the ownership of English no longer belongs just to the inner-circle countries (as proposed in the Three Circles model of World Englished by Kachru [21], which refers to countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada) [22], the legitimization of different varieties of Englishes needs to be encouraged. Finally, as Cots, J. [23] advocated, the teaching of CDA perspectives to students would arise their critical language awareness and critical thinking ability. Activities, where students are guided to conduct CDA on the ELT-related video analyzed in the current study, are expected to benefit ELF learners in their awareness of problematic ideologies.

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