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I Am Non-Looking English Language Teacher: Reclaiming South Asian ELTs' Identity in Japan

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores how South Asian English Language Teachers (ELTs) in Japan construct and negotiate professional legitimacy in the context of ongoing native-speakerism, racialized assumptions, and shifting institutional practices. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 22 South Asian ELTs working across diverse educational settings, the research employs a narrative inquiry and thematic analysis to explore how these educators construct and navigate their professional identities. The findings revealed that professional legitimacy is shaped not only by linguistic competency and teaching qualifications but also deeply influenced by perceptions of race, country of origin, and accent. While some teachers face ongoing challenges related to native-speakerism, institutional biases, and ambivalence regarding their status, some actively reclaimed their professional identities by embracing localized English varieties and positioning themselves as legitimate, culturally responsive educators. The policy shifts and institutional openness for diversity offer signs of hope, but the monolingual ideologies and native-speaker hierarchies remain entrenched in Japan's ELT landscape. The study concludes that professional identity formation for South Asian ELTs is a dynamic process of resistance, adaptation, and self-assertion, and underscores the need for systemic change to support genuine inclusion and professional recognition of diverse ELTs.

Keywords: *Professional Identity, Racialization, Institutional Bias, World Englishes, Identity Negotiation*

Introduction

English language teaching (ELT) in Japan has become increasingly diverse, encompassing educators with varied linguistic and cultural repertoires. This diversity includes native English-speaking instructors from Western countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, alongside the teachers from South and Southeast Asia, East Asia, Africa, and Europe. Collectively, these educators contribute distinct pedagogical orientations and culturally informed teaching practices that shape contemporary English language education in Japan (The Japan Times, 2024). Despite policy reforms and the increasing internationalization of English language teaching in Japan (Hashimoto, 2000), the ideology of native-speakerism remains

deeply embedded in the Japanese ELT system, which influences both societal attitudes and institutional recruitment practices. Within this framework, the English language is frequently conceptualized as the cultural and linguistic property of the English-dominant nations, reinforcing the perception that native-English speaking teachers from Western countries represent the most authentic language models. This privilege teachers from countries such as the US, the UK, and Australia, while marginalizing the professional recognition of equally qualified educators from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including those from South Asia (Holliday, 2006). In this scenario, Non-native ELTs encounter challenges related to their nationality, ethnicity, and students' expectations, navigating a professional environment where legitimacy is often tied to narrowly defined norms (Matikainen, 2020). This study examines the narratives of 22 South Asian English language teachers employed in diverse educational settings, focusing on how they position themselves along the native/non-native speaker continuum and how institutional, social, and pedagogical factors influence their identity construction, classroom practices, and professional interactions.

Literature Review

Native-Speakerism in Japan: Ideology and Impact

Native-speakerism refers to the ideological elevation of pro-nativeness (Liu, 2021), which believes that Western "native" English speakers are inherently superior as linguistic and pedagogical authorities in the field of ELT (Amanti, 2019). This ideology remains deeply embedded within Japan's ELT context due to interconnected historical, sociocultural, and policy-related factors. The association of English with Western modernization and global progress has positioned Western speakers as cultural and linguistic ideals, and this historical alignment between English proficiency and global prestige continues to shape Japan's educational policies, recruitment practices, and public perceptions of English teachers. This entrenched association of English with Western cultural and linguistic models is reflected in hiring practices in Japan, where job advertisements for teaching positions frequently specify a requirement for "native level" proficiency. Consequently, highly qualified teachers from non Western backgrounds, regardless of their linguistic competence or pedagogical expertise, are systematically excluded from such opportunities. This systemic bias, as Phillipson (1992) argued, perpetuates the notion that only certain nationalities can provide "authentic" English instruction in ELT and reinforces a hierarchy of one ethnicity over others, which influences how students, institutions, and colleagues perceive the legitimacy and authority of teachers from other regions, such as South Asia, the very issue this study seeks to address. Native-speakerism defines a link among English language teachers, language varieties, cultural orientations, and pedagogical approaches in ELT (Jun-shuan,2018). These ideologies often extend beyond institutional policies and reflect societal expectations about what constitutes English language teaching. Appleby (2014) noted that white, Western, male, native English-speaking teachers in Japan frequently enjoy social and professional privileges conferred by identity markers such as race, nationality, and gender, thereby reinforcing structural inequalities within the ELT field. Similarly, Hino (2018) observed that many Japanese learners

have internalized the belief that linguistic legitimacy is inseparable from Inner Circle norms, a stereotype reinforced in both classroom practices and broader societal discourses. Rivers (2011) further highlighted how these racialized ideologies affect not only teachers but also students' linguistic aspirations and self-perceptions. As a result, learners set unrealistic aspirations for themselves, believing that true English proficiency means sounding indistinguishable from a Western native speaker. This phenomenon, described as the native or near-native speaker fallacy, continues to persist in Japan despite the growing internationalization of English education (Kachru,1986; Yamada, 2010). Yashima (2002) argued that the beliefs connected to native or native-like English undermine students' confidence and discourage them from valuing their own linguistic repertoires, ultimately constraining their communicative potential. Hence, the enduring presence of native speakerism in Japan not only marginalizes non-Western teachers but also narrows the horizons for Japanese learners, making it a critical issue for the future of English education in Japan. Furthermore, the institutionalization of native and non-native norms has entrenched a rigid dichotomy between Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) and Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs), underscoring the need for pedagogical frameworks that embrace linguistic pluralism and racial inclusivity (Rosa & Flores, 2017).

NEST and NNEST in Japan

The distinction between Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) and Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) has long shaped the English language teaching profession in Japan, marginalizing NNESTs as less competitive in the field of ELT (Perry, 2021). NESTs, typically from countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, have traditionally been viewed as having a high standard for English instruction and using updated methodologies in ELT. This perception, deeply rooted in native-speakerism, is an ideology that privileges native speakers as the most legitimate language models and educators. Holliday (2005) explains that native speakers of English perpetuate the belief that only those who have grown up speaking English in Western countries possess the authentic linguistic and cultural knowledge, making them more desirable as teachers. As a result, Japanese schools and universities often advertise teaching positions with requirements for "native level" proficiency, a practice that systematically favors applicants from Western, "Inner Circle" (Karchu, 1985) countries. Houghton and Rivers (2013) highlighted how such hiring practices reinforce the marginalization of qualified teachers from other backgrounds, regardless of their teaching skills or language proficiency. The rationale behind this preference is the belief that NESTs provide authentic pronunciation, updated teaching methodologies, and exposure to "real" English, making them aspirational figures for Japanese students. However, this privileging of NESTs has significant consequences for NNESTs, a group that includes both Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) and foreign teachers from non-Western backgrounds.

NNESTs frequently encounter challenges to their professional legitimacy, with their language abilities and teaching authority sometimes questioned by students, parents, and administrators (Rivers, 2011). Despite these obstacles, research demonstrates that NNESTs offer valuable

strengths, such as a deep understanding of language learning processes, explicit grammar instruction, and empathy for learners' struggles, as observed by Matsuda (2003). Medgyes (1992) emphasizes that their own experience of learning English as a second/foreign language can help NNESTs connect with students on a personal level, making the learning environment more supportive. However, Yonezawa (2011) and the policy of MEXT (2014) highlighted that the Japanese ELT field is becoming increasingly diverse, and scholars such as Galloway and Rose (2015) argue that a more balanced approach of both NESTs and NNESTs can foster a more inclusive and effective language learning environment. This shift in perspective is essential for meeting the needs of a globalized student population and for recognizing the full range of professional contributions made by all English language teachers.

Professional Identity: Negotiation and Resistance

Teacher Identity is understanding the interaction of social, institutional, cultural, and environmental factors (Karimi & Mofidi,2019). English Language Teachers (ELTs) in Japan constantly navigate complex professional identities, which are shaped by historical, sociological, psychological, and cultural expectations (Beijaard et al., 2004; Varghese et al., 2005). For instance, native-speaking Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) are often placed in the role of "cultural ambassadors," expected to represent not only the English language but also the culture of their home countries. This positioning can be precarious, as their contributions are sometimes seen as supplementary rather than central to the language curriculum. Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs), on the other hand, find themselves balancing the traditional authority expected of teachers in Japanese society with increasing pressures to adopt more communicative and student-centered teaching methods. Nagatomo (2016) highlighted how these dual expectations can create tensions for JTEs, who must reconcile long-standing norms of teacher-centered instruction with evolving pedagogical trends that emphasize student interaction and communicative competence. This dynamic often results in a professional environment where both ALTs and JTEs must continuously adapt their roles, sometimes at the expense of their teaching philosophies or sense of professional identity.

Aoyama (2021) mentioned that, despite NNESTs identifying themselves as competent educators, their legitimacy is frequently challenged by native-speaker ideologies, often perceived as neither "authentic" native speakers nor relatable local instructors, placing them in a uniquely challenging position within the institutional hierarchy. To assert their legitimacy and rofessional value, many ELTs turn to hybrid practices such as codeswitching between languages or emphasizing their strengths in intercultural competence Morita (2017) noted that such strategies can help teachers carve out a space for themselves and gain the respect of both students and colleagues. However, these efforts are often constrained by systemic biases in hiring and evaluation, which tend to privilege Western credentials and backgrounds over actual pedagogical expertise. As a result, many talented educators of non-Western nationalities may find their contributions undervalued, highlighting the need for a more inclusive and equitable approach to professional identity in Japanese ELT.

With the growing emphasis on internationalization in higher education, Japanese universities have increasingly opened their classrooms to educators from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Within this expanding global academic environment, South Asian English language teachers, based on their qualifications and expertise, have also begun to establish a professional presence in Japan's ELT landscape. However, despite this diversification, the existing research has largely focused on the experiences of Western native English-speaking and Japanese educators, leaving the perspectives and experiences of South Asian ELTs underexplored. This gap limits our understanding of how South Asian ELTs negotiate their professional identity and how Japan's ELT system fosters diversity and inclusivity in classrooms. This study seeks to address the existing gap by exploring the following research questions through a narrative inquiry approach:

1. How do South Asian ELTs in Japan construct their professional identities through selfidentification along the native/non-native continuum?

2. How do personal beliefs, institutional practices, and social perceptions influence the ways South Asian ELTs negotiate their professional legitimacy in Japan's ELT context?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research paradigm, emphasizing narrative inquiry to explore the lived experiences of South Asian English Language Teachers (ELTs) in Japan. Narrative inquiry, as conceptualized by Connelly and Clandinin (1990), forms the methodological backbone of this research, enabling an understanding of how individuals construct, interpret, and articulate their professional identities through storytelling. By foregrounding participants' voices, this approach moves beyond surface-level accounts to reveal the sociocultural and institutional dynamics shaping their professional trajectories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Dhungana, 2022). In multicultural contexts, such as Japan's ELT landscape, narrative inquiry is particularly effective for capturing the complexity of identity negotiation (Barkhuizen, 2014).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 22 South Asian ELTs working across different educational contexts in Japan, including universities, secondary schools, and English conversation schools. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify participants who met the inclusion criteria of being (a) South Asian nationals and (b) currently engaged in English language teaching in Japan. Within this framework, participants were recruited through professional networks, ensuring diversity in South Asian nationality (India-10, Nepal-6, Bangladesh-3, Sri Lanka-2, Pakistan-1). Interviews were conducted online, lasting approximately 30 minutes, and scheduled at times most convenient for the participants. Prior to the interview, informed consent was obtained, and assurances of confidentiality were provided. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity in all reporting. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to systematically identify patterns within the narratives. Interview transcripts were coded inductively, enabling the emergence of themes and subthemes directly from the data. This participant-driven approach situates individual narratives within the

broader institutional and cultural context of Japan's ELT sector, deepening the understanding of identity negotiation among South Asian educators.

Analysis

Upon completion of data collection, the analysis addressed both research questions through thematic coding, revealing how South Asian English language teachers (ELTs) in Japan negotiate professional legitimacy. To address the first research question, participants reflected on their self-identification along the native/non-native speaker continuum, an issue deeply embedded in Japan's ELT. Among the 22 South Asian ELTs, nine identified as native speakers of English, eleven as non-native speakers, one as bilingual, and one rejected the binary, describing it as irrelevant and problematic. This variation reflects the ambivalence and complexity surrounding "nativeness," highlighting how self-identification of South Asian ELTs is shaped by internal self-perception, external theoretical validation, and institutionalized ideologies.

Participants situated their professional identities within a racialized and ideologically constructed binary of native versus non-native speakers. They reported that legitimacy in the Japanese ELT context is not solely determined by linguistic proficiency or qualifications but is inextricably linked to ethnicity as expressed through skin color, accent, and country of origin.

Several participants identified as non-native speakers not merely due to language proficiency but because of experiences of racialized exclusion tied to their physical appearance and nationality. One participant explained the feeling, being compelled due to an internalized inferiority complex.

> I am not a native speaker because I do not come from a country like Australia, America, or Canada. Before entering the classroom, I think about how the students will accept me. My skin and face identify me as South Asian, so I try to hide that part. I have a kind of inferiority complex.

Another participant emphasized how brown skin is automatically equated with linguistic illegitimacy within Japan: *"My skin is not white, my accent is neither American, British, nor Australian. Being brown automatically associates me with being Asian or South Asian, which in Japan means English is not expected to be used."* These narratives reflect internalized tensions where professional legitimacy is undermined by racialized perceptions. Such experiences resonate with Holliday's (2005) concept of native-speakerism, where linguistic authority is racialized, with Rosa and Flores's (2017) argument on raciolinguistic ideologies that link language legitimacy with nationality, and with Appleby's (2014) findings on discrimination against qualified non-Western ELTs in Japan. Another participant underscored the relative privilege accorded to white European native speakers, stating: *"I am non-native, or what to say, non-looking compared to Caucasians. If you are from Europe, you are more accepted as an English language teacher in Japan."* This response highlights that your appearance and nationality are significant markers of authenticity, inherently racialized and privileged in the Japanese ELT, as noted by Nagatomo (2016) and Rivers (2011). These insights collectively suggest that South Asian ELTs in Japan

contend complex professional identity formation process shaped not only by linguistic factors but also by entrenched ethnic hierarchies and cultural ideologies.

Another subtheme that emerged from the participant narratives was the reclaiming of professional identity by challenging the binary framing of the native/non-native speakers. One participant articulated a sense of ownership over the English language and considered a legitimate and competent English user. He asserted, *"I consider myself a native speaker of Indian English, and I'm very confident in my identity. I am from South Asia and have a Commonwealth variety of English, so it's dynamic."* This assertion reflects the recognition of World Englishes (Kachru, 1986), which validates the diverse varieties. However, this selfidentification often conflicted with the dominant monolithic native-speaker ideals prevalent in Japan's ELT environment (Hino, 2018). Another participant emphasized that, *"English has been my language of thought, emotion, feelings, and comfort. So technically, I am a native speaker of English, but in Japan, I do not fit there, and people have issues with me being, my origin,"* underscoring the disconnect between inclusive linguistic self-perceptions and constrained professional realities experienced by South Asian ELTs in Japan.

Further resistance to the native/non-native highlighted a disconnect between the theoretical definition of a native speaker and the lived professional realities of South Asian ELTs in Japan. Participants reported confusion and frustration about the inconsistent and arbitrary criteria used to define "native speaker" status in Japan. As one participant asserted, *"It's confusing because when I came to Japan, I thought I was a native speaker, but here I noticed that there was a kind of hierarchy and white people are only considered native speakers. So, I don't know. It's kind of arbitrary."* Such reflections underscore how native-speakerism not only shapes professional hierarchies but also produces psychological dissonance among teachers whose linguistic expertise is overshadowed by racialized perceptions. Yet, two participants resist this binary entirely. One participant stated, *"I do not like the phrase itself. I would not consider myself to be a native speaker or a non-native speaker. I"m a nontraditional speaker of English"*, and another participant mentioned that *"I would like to call myself bilingual."* Such labeling represents acts of resistance and redefinition against normative categorizations, advocating for pluralistic and inclusive paradigms in English language teaching.

Addressing the second research question, the analysis examined how personal experiences, institutional structures, and sociocultural dynamics intersect to shape South Asian ELTs' identity in Japan. Participants described identity formation as an ongoing process of negotiating internal beliefs with external validation, consistent with Karimi & Mofidi's (2019) and Varghese et al.'s (2005) perspectives on teacher identity as evolving through sociocultural interactions. Some participants articulated tensions between self-confidence in their professional competence and a perceived lack of recognition from students and colleagues. One participant reflected, *"It's a bit confusing and difficult to describe myself as an ELT in Japan. Even if I consider myself a native speaker, my students don't, which makes me feel more hardworking and responsible to prove myself."* This response highlighted the dissonance between personal professional confidence and external recognition, exemplifying the complexity of identity construction.

The narratives further revealed how racialized misrecognition undermines professional legitimacy, with appearance often excluding teachers from acceptance. One participant recalled, racialized experience as,

> After I came to Japan and applied for the job, I was invited for an interview. They thought I was a native speaker, but when they saw me, they were kind of surprised by my appearance, my Asian face, and they looked at me in different ways. They weren't interested in taking me.

This experience exemplifies Holliday's (2006) "native speaker fallacy," where nationality and appearance substitute for professional qualifications. This racial profiling was not limited to the hiring stage but permeated their capacity to teach and to understand the students' perceptive as well. One participant admitted, *"There are microaggressions, and they are a day-to-day reality for us, being asked about our quality."* Similarly, another participant mentioned subconscious discrimination as, *"Time and again, I have to explain my linguistic identity, which sometimes irritates me. Also, the students find it difficult to place me as their ELT as I am the first Indian teacher they have ever had."* These narratives highlighted how racialized ideologies and internal anxieties of South Asian ELTs influence teachers' sense of belonging within Japanese ELT. Despite these challenges, some participants reframed their ethnicity and cultural identity as pedagogical assets. One participant proudly noted, "When I go into the classroom, I know that I come from a culture which is not familiar to the Japanese students, so by looking at me, they will feel interested and motivated." This shows the individual's effort to move beyond the ongoing narratives, where teachers leverage their multicultural background as a source of intercultural insight and classroom engagement. Such responses align with Beijaard et al. (2004) and Varghese et al.(2005), who conceptualize teacher identity as dynamic and contextually mediated rather than static.

Institutional policies and hiring practices emerged as a significant influence on how South Asian ELTs construct and negotiate their professional identities. Participants frequently noted institutional preferences for *"native speakers"* from Inner Circle countries (Kachru, 1985), with race and origin overshadowing qualifications. As one noted, *"Because of my skin color, and where I'm from, there is discrimination. When it comes to hiring, they say that they're looking for English teachers from the inner circle."* This statement underscores the enduring impact of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992), where non-Western teachers remain disadvantaged regardless of their qualifications or fluency. Another participant pointed out how pronunciation was the judgmental factor in Japan's ELT context, *"Maybe my pronunciation might not be exactly the same as what Google or Microsoft says, so what, still I am an English language teacher."* Such remarks reveal how Western linguistic norms continue to define professional legitimacy, echoing Houghton and River's (2013) findings that Japanese institutions often prioritize image and accent over pedagogical skill.

Another recurring theme was institutional hierarchy and racialized workplace dynamics. One participant explained, "*Western teachers are allowed to have opinions, and if they say," We do this in the UK or USA," it is immediately accepted.* But I'm expected to follow rules and read the atmosphere." This account highlights how race and cultural capital intersect within

institutional power structures, reinforcing Western authority while marginalizing nonWestern professionals (Nagatomo, 2016; Perry, 2021). Moreover, participants also encountered questions that challenged their professional legitimacy. One participant recalled, *"You are non-native speakers, and you are from Nepal. How can you teach in English?"* These doubts are rooted in essentialist beliefs that teaching English requires certain linguistic or racial backgrounds, rather than being a matter of pedagogical competence (Hino, 2018). Nevertheless, some participants noted shifting institutional openness and pursuing internationalization in academia. One teacher remarked, *"Things are getting better. I know universities that are looking for a more diverse faculty, looking at qualifications and not things like skin color."* This suggests emerging openness aligned with Japan's policy effort toward internationalization in higher education (Hashimoto, 2000; MEXT, 2014), and trying to create a balance between the native/non-native dichotomy (Galloway & Rose, 2014). Another participant mentioned, *"There is nothing about looking for native speakers, but it's all our hesitations from our inner mind, which is controlling us."* This points to the internalization of discriminatory ideologies, which can perpetuate self-doubt even in more inclusive contexts.

Japanese language proficiency was frequently identified as an important factor for professional integration and recognition. One participant noted, *"It doesn't matter what color you are or where you're from, but if you have Japanese language proficiency or the qualifications, that matters a lot."* This finding is consistent with Yonezawa's (2011) claim about language mediating academic inclusion. Teachers also discussed the pedagogical adjustment required to align with Japan's communicative and skill-based approaches. One participant explained, *"Here, I am learning how to navigate the cultural context of teaching, which is more skill-based."* This highlighted that the adaptation to Japan's skill-based and pronunciation-focused pedagogical approaches required significant effort, underscoring the emotional labor entailed in ongoing identity negotiation.

Beyond the personal experiences and institutional boundaries, societal perceptions of English and its role in Japan also shape South Asian ELTs' experiences. One participant acknowledged, *"I think we;re at the bottom in ELT in the Japanese context."* Another participant highlighted that, *"I've had European co-workers who are non-native speakers, but they are white, so they are more favored."* These responses demonstrate how South Asian ELTs remained pervasive both socially and professionally (Liu,2021). However, some participants reclaimed their identity as cultural pride through positive representation of their home cultures. One participant noted, *"I always say positive things about Sri Lanka or other Asian countries that helped me to develop my teacher identity as a confident teacher."* Such acts of self-affirmation show the resistance where cultural space and linguistic identity reclaim professional space. Participants also reflected on Japan's changing educational landscape, highlighting openness and internationalization efforts. One teacher commented, *"Japan's education policy, system, and society really value English language education. Recently, many foreigners are invited as ELTs here."* This observation aligns with Yonezawa (2011) and Hashimoto (2000) on internationalization *(kokusaika),* where policy reforms aim to diversify faculty and promote global competencies.

The broader monolingual ideology of Japanese society was identified as a barrier in ELT in

Japan. English in Japan is often viewed as an external global tool rather than a domestically integrated resource. One participant explained, *"English belongs to native speakers; that mental block is just immense in this country."* Another participant highlighted, "English here is a tool with the outside world, not within." This ambivalence towards English elevates the internal tension between respect for their position and undervaluation of their expertise. Another participant shared an experience about English as a subject, *"Unlike Nepal, in Japan, English is not taken as a subject, but rather a fun activity or something like an extracurricular activity."* These narratives reflect Yamada's (2010) observation that English in Japan remains positioned as an external, optional tool rather than an integrated communicative resource. Nevertheless, some participants expressed optimism about changing social attitudes and emphasized the global nature of English teaching. One participant highlighted, *"There is respect for English instructors, English sensei. English teachers' position in Japanese society is high, whether you are South Asian or non-South Asian."* This suggests the diverse landscape and recognition of professional status in ELT in Japan. Another participant shared, *"Given the changing society, they also need to think of the nonJapanese ideas. So, we do not have to be afraid of being an English teacher in Japan regardless of your background."* These narratives highlighted the changing social attitudes and emphasized the global nature of English teaching, affirming that the professional legitimacy of ELTs should transcend traditional native-speaker boundaries. Overall, the findings revealed that South Asian ELTs' negotiation of professional legitimacy in Japan is shaped by internal beliefs and self-perceptions, institutional structures, and societal ideologies that sustain racialized notions of English ownership.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer a nuanced understanding of how South Asian ELTs in Japan negotiate professional legitimacy within an environment shaped by persistent nativespeakerism, entrenched institutional Englishes (Kachru, 1986), which advocate for plural and legitimate English norms in pedagogy.

This study also situates the negotiation of professional legitimacy at the intersection of individual beliefs, institutional policies, and broader sociocultural ideologies. Although there are signs of inclusivity and gradual diversification (Hashimoto, 2000; Galloway & Rose, 2014), systematic bias in hiring and professional recognition persists. The findings revealed that the privileging of white Western ethnicity continues to influence both student and administrative perceptions of teachers' competence, as noted by Rivers (2011) and Nagatomo (2016). English in Japan functions as a tool for globalization, an academic discipline, and extracurricular activities, complicating the professional status of non-Western teachers. This perception reinforces Japan's monolingual and native-speakerist ideologies (Yamada, 2010), further marginalizing educators who do not fit the expected racialized norms. Participants also highlighted that Japanese language proficiency often mediates integration into the academic community, supporting Yonezawa's (2011) claim that local language competence facilitates professional inclusion. However, this

does not fully dismantle the racial and ethnic hierarchies. Some participants observed increasing institutional openness and internationalization towards diversity, where teaching qualifications and professional expertise are valued over nationality, as suggested by Hashimoto (2000), MEXT (2014), and Galloway & Rose (2014). Yet, this openness and advancement coexist with self-doubt, microaggressions, and structural inequities, illustrating that progress remains uneven and complex.

The growing institutional emphasis on global engagement that extends beyond the nativespeaker norms presents potential pathways for South Asian ELTs to reimagine English teaching in Japan. However, the prevailing sociocultural framing of English as an external, globally oriented skill, rather than a domestic communicative need, limits acceptance of diverse teacher identities. This perspective perpetuates the hierarchical positioning of Western models, even in the context of increasing faculty diversity. Overall, the interplay of personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors creates a dynamic, yet inequitable landscape in which South Asian ELTs continually negotiate between self-perception and eternal labeling. Addressing these tensions demands not only institutional reform but also structural and cultural transformation within Japan's ELT sector.

Conclusion

This study explored how South Asian English Language Teachers (ELTs) in Japan construct, negotiate, and reclaim their professional identities within a racially stratified and linguistically hierarchical ELT context. Through the narratives of 22 teachers, the research reveals that identity formation is not merely a reflection of linguistic competence or pedagogical expertise, but is profoundly shaped by institutional practices, social perceptions, and racialized ideologies embedded in the native/non-native binary. Participants experienced professional marginalization due to their physical appearance, accent, or nationality, highlighting how native-speakerism in Japan operates as both a linguistic and racial construct. Yet, some participants utilized their personal self by redefining what it means to be an English language teacher and by asserting ownership over localized English varieties, affirming their pedagogical legitimacy, and resisting dominant hierarchies that privilege Western native speakers. Institutionally, while some universities have been promoting internationalization and inclusive practices in ELT in Japan, biases favoring "inner-circle" English language teachers still exist. Socially, Japan's instrumental view of English as a peripheral, foreign tool (Hino, 2018) further complicates South Asian ELTs' roles, situating them simultaneously as essential yet peripheral actors in Japan's educational landscape. The title "I Am Non-Looking English Language Teacher" encapsulates the tension between marginalization and agency, reflecting broader postcolonial resistance in global ELT. Participants' experiences of identity formation highlight the need for equitable policies that recognize diverse competencies, such as anti-bias training, curricular integration of World Englishes, and meritbased hiring. By centering these educators' voices, this study advocates for a reimaging of the competencies, such as inclusive ELT in Japan where professionalism is rooted in qualification, pedagogical expertise, rather than ethnicity. As Japan navigates globalization, embracing such reforms will be critical to fostering internationalization in the culturally responsive education systems.

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