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“More Like You”: Disrupting Native Speakerism Through a Multimodal Online Intercultural Exchange

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Research over the past decades has demonstrated the harmful effects of native speakerism in English language teaching, including how perceptions of native speaker status are deeply intertwined with race and national identity. Recently, scholars have begun to investigate how teacher training programs might push back on native speakerism by providing classroom opportunities for students to challenge their assumptions about native speakers. This article discusses the disruptive potential of an online intercultural learning activity in which MA TESL students in Sri Lanka communicated through digital platforms with undergraduates in New York City. Drawing on data from interviews and students' online writing, this study suggests that, as students shared videos and “linguistic landscape” images and discussed language differences, the MA TESL students confronted linguistic and racial diversity in the United States, recognizing the presence of dialects like African American Vernacular English and drawing on shared English as a second language status to gain confidence in communicating internationally. Ultimately, both groups of students began to question their beliefs about the superiority of inner circle speakers. The article concludes by discussing the benefits of the increased awareness of linguistic variation, considering how this might encourage teachers to move beyond native speaker standards in the classroom, and offering practical suggestions for implementing similar projects.

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Nelum: At the beginning ... I was thinking maybe they were uh students whose first language is English and then actually when I started I learned that they are not. They are ... like us ...

Brooke: OK so you weren't expecting them to be [from all these different languages].

Nelum: [Yeah, exactly.] I didn't expect ... I don't know, maybe more like uh America natural born ... you know?

Brooke: Me. ((laughter))

Nelum: ((laughter)) Yeah, exactly, more like you.

In the excerpt above, Nelum, a Sri Lankan teacher of English and student in an MA TESL program, describes what she expected when told she would be communicating with students in the United States through an online forum. She was surprised to learn that some of the students in the United States were also second language speakers of English—people “like us.” Then, struggling to describe her image of those who are “America natural born,” she finally gestured toward me, the White, apparently monolingual researcher—people “more like you.”

For Nelum and many other English language teachers around the world, the image of an ideal speaker of English remains that of a White, monolingual person from the United States or the United Kingdom; this, more so than linguistic proficiency, is often what defines a “native speaker” (Holliday, 2009; Kubota, 2015; Shuck, 2006). In the field of English language teaching (ELT), this perception has been called *native speakerism* (Holliday, 2006) and feeds into the widespread *native speaker fallacy* (Phillipson, 1992), the belief that native speakers are automatically superior teachers because they represent normative language, innovative pedagogy, and Western culture—because they “own” English and by extension English language pedagogy (Widdowson, 1994). These beliefs, based on oversimplifications of the Chomskian notion of the monolingual idealized native speaker and supported by second language acquisition research and language learning materials that measure success by native speaker standards, reinforce the power and status of “natural born” speakers in English-dominant countries (Cook, 1999).

This limited, racialized image of a native speaker permeates all aspects of ELT. It determines which varieties of English are enshrined in high-stakes tests like the TOEFL and IELTS and in teacher training (Matsuda, 2012), and it limits who is recruited and hired to teach English globally, strongly favoring young White native speakers from English-dominant countries (Ruecker & Ives, 2015). Even in deeply multilingual societies, the goal of English language instruction is still most often the acquisition of a “pure” or “standard” educated British or U.S. accent (Matsuda, 2012) as a path to social prestige and economic advancement. These practices cause deep anxiety among non-native-speaking teachers (Nuske, 2018; Park, 2012), shaping assumptions about the abilities and knowledge of both native- and nonnative-speaking teachers (Lowe & Kiczowski, 2016).

The privileging of native speakers and Western pedagogical methods has long been critiqued by scholars (Canagarajah, 1999; Mahboob, 2010; Phillipson, 1992; Widdowson, 1994), and a large body of work in fields such as English as a lingua franca (ELF; Jenkins, 2011; Seidlhofer, 2011) has demonstrated how language use outside the classroom has shifted away from dependence on native speaker norms. However, “standard English” continues to dominate language testing, hiring practices, and pedagogy at both micro and macro levels, and any English that deviates from this narrow standard is treated as deficient (Holliday, Aboshiha, & Swan, 2015; Kubota, 2015; Lippi-Green, 2012).

Recently, ELT scholarship has begun to ask what teacher training programs specifically might do to work against native speakerism. Floris (2013) described how exposing preservice teachers to World English varieties and holding critical discussions of concepts like the native speaker fallacy enabled her students to develop greater respect for local varieties and increased confidence in their own value as non-native speaking teachers. Kiczkowiak, Baines, and Krummenacher (2016) noted that teacher training programs “play a crucial role in whether teachers will challenge or accept . . . the dominant ELT discourse of native speakerism” (p. 2) and suggested that programs incorporate activities that raise students’ awareness of ideological bias in the field and in their own experiences. Work in transnational education has similarly suggested that online intercultural activities, as part of a critical approach to teacher training, can offer students the opportunity to communicate directly with users of English who may challenge their beliefs about “proper” English, the identities and abilities of language learners, and their own privilege as native speakers (You, 2016; Zhang, 2018).

In this article, I describe the outcomes of an online intercultural activity in which MA TESL students in Sri Lanka communicated through digital platforms with undergraduate students in New York City. They learned about their own and each other’s varieties of English, then shared images of English language use in their surroundings. Analyzing the students’ online posts and data from semistructured interviews, I explore how interactions with a highly diverse group of English speakers in an inner circle context impacted the Sri Lankan students’ preconceived images of native speakers and understandings of themselves as second language (L2) speakers. I conclude by considering how elements of this project might be used in other teaching contexts to open up spaces for challenging native speaker ideologies and help English language teachers become more receptive to teaching based on locally derived norms.

ELT AND TEACHER TRAINING IN AN ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

As English has become the language of international business, travel, education, and mass media, students are by and large no longer learning English to communicate with idealized native speakers, but with English users from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, and primarily other speakers of English as a second or foreign language (Crystal, 2012; Graddol, 1997; Matsuda, 2006). In response to these changes, scholars have called for new paradigms of ELT that reflect “the linguistic, functional, and cultural diversity associated with the English language today” (Matsuda, 2018, p. 25). These new paradigms—whether aligned with ELF, English as an international language (EIL), or World Englishes—seek to emphasize communicative strategies and locally created norms over mastery of a native speaker variety, provide alternative models who are expert L2 users of English, demonstrate the value of codeswitching and innovation, and “problematize the exclusive focus on the U.S. and U.K” in ELT (Matsuda, 2018, p. 26; see also Galloway & Rose, 2017). The goal of such pedagogies is to prepare students to communicate in a world of highly diverse English speakers, in part by directly challenging native speakerism and standard language ideologies.

However, in practice English language teaching globally lags far behind the changed reality (Matsuda, 2012), in part due to a lack of teaching materials that acknowledge the diversity of English (Galloway & Rose, 2017). In postcolonial settings like Sri Lanka, despite both widespread use and scholarly study of local English varieties, there is deep ambiguity around the adoption of local varieties in education (Mendis & Rambukwella, 2010), and mastery of “native-like” English continues to be associated with both individual advancement and national entrance into the global economy (“British Council Launches Project,” 2018). To change deeply held ideologies that privilege inner circle varieties, scholars suggest, teacher training programs need to take several steps: introduce critical theories about language ideology and examples of World English varieties, provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on their own experiences with language and linguistic bias, critique definitions of native and nonnative speakers, and formulate strategies to combat native speakerism in the field (Floris, 2013; Kiczkowski et al., 2016; Kumaravadevelu, 2016).

As a part of this process, direct contact with speakers of other World English varieties can create a valuable opportunity for students to notice and confront assumptions about language difference and native speaker status (Kubota, 2001). For the many teacher educators

working in linguistically homogenous environments, digital communication technologies such as social media platforms, blogs, and chat programs can be used to create this contact. You (2016) argued that such a digital border-crossing model can increase preservice teachers' sensitivity to linguistic variation. For example, in Zhang's (2018) study of preservice ESL teachers in the United States communicating online with English language learners in China, teachers were able to rethink their ideas about ESL teaching, such as the categorization of language variation as language error, and recognize the innovativeness of the Chinese students' language use. Perhaps most importantly, the project helped the preservice teachers reevaluate how much authority their native speaker status gave them as teachers, pushing back against a key tenet of native speakerism (Holliday, 2006).

Previously, these digital border-crossing projects in teacher training courses were studied for their benefits in helping native-speaking teachers in the United States develop sensitivity to global varieties of English; in this article, although the project was designed to benefit both U.S. and Sri Lankan students, I focus primarily on the responses of the Sri Lankan MA TESL students.

ONLINE INTERCULTURAL LEARNING, MULTIMODALITY, AND LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPES

In education, digital spaces can support both identity work and the questioning of cultural assumptions, in part because school-based online work creates a temporary community in which students are both anonymous (physically distant from their classmates) and known (members of a shared community; . Park, Warren, Weichart, & Pawan, 2016). An important affordance of online intercultural exchanges is the opportunity to connect across multiple modes, helping to build valuable shared context (Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2014). In the activity described in this article, students exchanged both self-introduction videos and images from their "linguistic landscapes"—language displayed in public spaces, such as street signs, notices, shop names, advertisements, and graffiti (Gorter, 2006). Linguistic landscape studies are typically used to document linguistic changes in urban spaces resulting from processes such as migration, gentrification, and language planning, focusing on "interrelationships of language, power, and society" (Malinowski, 2018, p. 870). Documenting their linguistic landscapes enabled students on both sides of this exchange to share with their peers the rich multilingualism of their environments, supporting them in "simultaneously imagining and engaging the geographically and culturally distant social worlds of others" (Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2014, p.

16). Crucially, because simple exposure to difference is not sufficient to develop intercultural awareness, pedagogical activities should be designed around opportunities to draw explicit cross-cultural comparisons and directly react to others' submissions (O'Dowd, 2007), in this case via prompts on an online discussion forum.

ORIGINS AND STRUCTURE OF THE PROJECT

In the fall of 2016, hoping to connect students in my World Englishes classroom directly with speakers in the outer circle, I reached out to my academic contacts and was eventually put in touch with Mihiri Jansz, an instructor at the Open University of Sri Lanka. Through a series of Skype calls, carefully scheduled around the 10.5-hour time difference, we set goals and designed the tasks our students would complete that spring. During the project, we had joint control of all the platforms, and we communicated regularly via Skype and WhatsApp.

Our joint goal for the pedagogical project was simply to give all of our students the opportunity to have direct, meaningful interactions with speakers of different varieties of English. The Sri Lankan students, English teachers enrolled in a sociolinguistics course as part of a continuing education MA TESL program, would get to see and discuss diverse usage of the language they were engaged in teaching. The students in the United States, undergraduates enrolled in a World Englishes course, would get to communicate with speakers of one of the postcolonial dialects they were studying. We as instructors hoped that both groups of students would, through person-to-person interaction, develop more awareness of and respect for English as it is used as a global language, and the research project emerged from these pedagogical goals.

We selected a platform accessible to both groups—the open-source course management site used by the Sri Lankan university—and invited all students to create accounts. Given the size of Mihiri's class (around 45 active students) and mine (26 students), we divided the students into groups of three to four Sri Lankan students and two to three New York students, then invited the groups to join individual discussion forums. Students first shared brief videos introducing themselves, including their names, family backgrounds, languages spoken, areas of study, and future goals. Next, students read texts about the structure and history of Englishes spoken in New York and Sri Lanka,¹ then shared reactions to the texts and posed questions to their group members.

¹ We selected the chapter on Sri Lankan Englishes in the *Handbook of World Englishes* (Kachru, Kachru, & Nelson, 2009) and two chapters from Michael Newman's (2014) *New York City English*.

The second part of the project consisted of small-scale linguistic landscape studies (Gorter, 2006). Students selected a location in their neighborhoods and collected images of language use in those spaces, then used a free photo-sharing site, Flickr, to share their images with their group members, who were invited to view and comment on the photographs. Finally, students analyzed their linguistic landscapes and shared their conclusions via face-to-face poster presentations.

SRI LANKAN CONTEXTS AND PARTICIPANTS

Sri Lanka's official languages are Sinhala and Tamil, but due to the history of British colonization, English is used regularly in courts, schools, private business, and the media, and exposure to English varies widely: Across the country, there are speakers of English as a first, second, and foreign language (Mendis & Rambukwella, 2010). This unequal access has led to a longstanding linguistic hierarchy with habitual English speakers as the "Anglophone elites," who enjoy the economic and social benefits of the prestige language (Kandiah, 1984, cited in Ratwatte, 2012). As Mendis and Rambukwella (2010) noted, there are "widely disparate attitudes prevalent about and towards Sri Lankan English" (p. 182), though Bernaisch (2012) predicted that British English will remain the prestige form.

The status of British English is reinforced by the educational system. English language education in Sri Lanka is mandatory beginning in the third grade, and many private or international schools are conducted almost exclusively in English following British curricula. This requirement has led to longstanding anxiety about the English-speaking abilities of K–12 teachers, driven by native speaker ideologies and often internalized by the teachers themselves, and to ongoing involvement from external language authorities such as the British Council ("British Council Launches Project," 2018). The MA TESL students in this study therefore had to grapple with governmental and institutional policies enforcing "standard English" (Mendis & Rambukwella, 2010) while deciding on target forms of English in their classrooms. In this study, the Sri Lankan students represented a range of ages, from early 20s to mid-50s, and ethnic backgrounds, including Sinhala, Tamil, and Moor. The instructor, Mihiri, identifies ethnically as a Burgher and linguistically as a first language (L1) speaker of English who is also fluent in Sinhala. In contrast, the majority of the students identified English as their second language and tended to regard their own use of English as quite formal, even "old-fashioned," in keeping with the overall discourse style of Sri Lankan English. For example, one participant, Ramya, noted that she expected her New York

counterparts “to be more informal than us . . . because we Sri Lankans are quite formal, I guess [laughs]” (August 2). In their introductory videos, the Sri Lankan students described their language backgrounds, and many students explicitly indexed their L1 cultures, choosing to wear saris, kurtas, or other traditional dress and offering codeswitched Sinhala greetings.

The MA TESL program at the Open University of Sri Lanka is offered in a hybrid mode: the majority of students’ coursework takes place online, supplemented by optional “day schools,” weekend face-to-face courses. Although some of the students lived in urban centers, many were from highly rural areas with limited local opportunities for further education. Because only a small minority of students already had experience using English either to communicate with foreigners or while traveling abroad, for most students the activity was truly novel.

U.S. CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

Baruch College, located in New York City, has a highly linguistically diverse student population, with more than 40% of students reporting that English is not their first language and 39% reporting that they were born outside of the U.S. mainland (City University of New York Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2017). The undergraduates in the Globalization of English course included speakers of Chinese, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Gujarati, Burmese, Serbo-Croatian, Tagalog, and Haitian Creole, as well as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and dialects of English specific to New York City. Their fields of study included communications, sociology, business, and English literature, and like the Sri Lankan students, the students ranged in age from early 20 to mid-50s.

The New York students’ introductory videos also tended to highlight their multilingualism. Several students told stories of family immigration: Mariana² and Louisa described how their families had come to New York from the Dominican Republic and Guatemala, respectively, explaining that though they had lived in the United States from young ages and felt most comfortable in English, they still spoke Spanish with their families. Another student, Xing, codeswitched in his video, introducing himself first in Mandarin and then in English, before describing how he and his parents had immigrated from China when he was 12. Ester described herself as a Haitian American who spoke both English and Haitian Creole. Students who identified as native speakers of English, such as Tony, mentioned studying foreign languages (French,

² All students’ names are pseudonyms.

in his case). These videos established the students' diverse self-identifications with regard to language, culture, and nationality early on in the project.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data presented here were collected as part of a larger study designed and carried out collaboratively by the instructors, with the help of two research assistants. The data include the students' posts on the discussion forums and on Flickr (the photo-sharing site used for the linguistic landscape images), interviews with students, and the instructors' reflections.

Posts

After the classes were completed, Mihiri and I each contacted our own students to request permission to use their posts and to invite them to participate in interviews. The discussion forum threads of the students who consented were collected, with screenshots where necessary to capture multimodal posts. Altogether, 40 discussion threads were collected from 12 student groups, which produced a discussion forum data set of approximately 27,000 words as well as approximately 260 images from Flickr.

Interviews

In summer 2017, Mihiri and I jointly conducted face-to-face semistructured group interviews with 18 Sri Lankan student participants in four cities: Colombo, Kandy, Galle, and Jaffna. As an incentive to participate, students were offered a 1-hour workshop on language pedagogy, and interviews were framed as an opportunity both to reflect on the course and to practice speaking English. The interviews focused on students' expectations for the online communication, their impressions of the New York students' use of language, their reactions to the linguistic landscape study, and the connections between this course project and their current and future teaching. All interviews were conducted in English.

In fall 2017, I conducted phone interviews with four of the New York students. In addition to semistructured interviews about their expectations for and responses to the project, these interviews included a stimulated recall component (Gass & Mackey, 2000). I

selected moments from the discussion forums in which students appeared to be negotiating language differences or referenced nationality, shared screenshots of those posts during the interviews, and asked students to reflect on them.

Analysis

Data from the interviews and discussion forums were examined using a grounded content analysis approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), in which patterns and themes that emerge from the data are identified and coded over multiple rounds of analysis. For this study, I focused on themes that emerged around the connections between language, race, and nationality, which underpin language ideologies (Shuck, 2006), with my co-researcher providing critical feedback on the emerging themes. In particular, I looked for moments in which students identified feelings of surprise, which can index *cognitive/emotion growth points* in teacher cognition (Johnson & Worden, 2014), and then traced the origins of those moments across the other data sources.

Researcher Positionality and Limitations

As the opening anecdote suggests, I identify (and was identified by the students) as White, an L1 speaker of English, and an American, whereas Mihiri identifies as a Burgher, an ethnic minority of Sri Lanka, and as bilingual in Sri Lankan English and Sinhala. As the course instructors, our positive attitudes toward intercultural communication and English language diversity were very familiar to the students. These positionings shaped our relationships with the participants, at times providing useful references points for discussing race, nationality, and language, but also potentially constraining how comfortable students felt expressing criticism of the project or of their international peers' language. It is also important to consider that the student experiences discussed here are from students who volunteered for the study, representing only a minority of each class.

FINDINGS

A “New” Experience

For many of the Sri Lankan participants, this project was a rare opportunity to communicate directly with English speakers from other

countries. Dilshari, who was one of the most experienced English teachers in the class, described the interaction in the class as “the first time” she had spoken to someone in English outside of Sri Lanka, saying that “for 25 years I couldn’t get such a chance in my career” (August 2). Ramya described how the “exposure” to the New York students was a new experience: “I’ve never done such a thing before in my life, to be honest” (August 2). Nilanga also reported that prior to the project he “was having zero exposure with these foreign people,” aside from an occasional tourist (August 11). Although a few of the more privileged students had already had experience with inner circle cultures, and reported feeling comfortable with the interactions because of it, many of the students lived in remote locations and found foreign travel relatively inaccessible. As with similar online intercultural learning projects (Chen, Hsu, & Caropreso, 2006), providing an opportunity for this new communicative experience was a key goal of the project.³

At least some of the New York students also oriented to the experience as something novel, despite many of them living deeply transnational lives shaped by immigration, travel, and regular cross-cultural communication. Louisa, the student born in Guatemala, wrote in one forum post that for her “it will be the first time interacting with international students.” When asked about this post in an interview, she responded that this was her first time to have “correspondence with someone outside of New York in a school setting.” Similarly, Nia described the project as “honestly pretty exciting” because she had “never communicated” with students “on an international level where they’re pretty much on the other side of the world.” Like the Sri Lankan students, some New York students saw the project as a rare opportunity to communicate with “foreign people,” constructing the Sri Lankan students as both culturally and linguistically other. For many of the students, the project opened up possibilities to articulate and confront their expectations of “foreign” speakers of English.

Recognizing Diversity

In general, both groups of students tended to describe the project as introducing them to new and unexpected ways of using English. For the New York students, however, this kind of exposure was the primary purpose of the World Englishes course. Although students

³ Although internet access is more accessible than international travel, it is far from universal. Multiple students reported difficulties accessing the websites because of slow or inconsistent internet access, sometimes due to inconsistent electricity. These opportunities for intercultural communication, and their educational benefits, are still constrained by both a country’s infrastructure and individual access to technology.

approached the direct communication with the Sri Lankan students as a novelty, they reported that Sri Lankan English did not specifically stand out from the rest of their learning in the course.

In contrast, the Sri Lankan students regularly commented on the variety of Englishes they encountered among the New York students. For example, Ramya's New York group members included a student who identified as an Italian American from Brooklyn and a student who had immigrated from Russia as a child. When asked what she noticed about their use of English, Ramya specifically remarked on the contrast between the varieties of English they spoke: "Between the two of them, yeah. They had very different accents" (August 2).

For at least one student, the project was an introduction to African American Vernacular English. Shalini, a university instructor, described the project in her interview as "an eye opener," noting that "New York is such a mishmash" (August 6). In Shalini's group, Tamara, a Haitian American student, shared three videos from the African American YouTube vlogger MsAaliyahJay to demonstrate what she called "a strong Brooklyn accent," including a video titled "How to Talk Like You're From New York." Tamara's post specifically drew her group members' attention to the use of *was* instead of *were* in the past tense (e.g., "we *was* about to fight"), a feature of AAVE that has influenced New York City English (Newman, 2014). In responding to Tamara's post, Shalini wrote:

Oh, what an eye opener to the English language in your part of the world. . . . I noticed that they speak so fast, which seems normal in their speech style, considering what I have heard firsthand of a white female from Washington, DC.

In her interview, Shalini specified that her previous experience with American English speakers (the "white female" she references in her post) had been with academics, whose use of English is "very, very proper." In contrast, the speakers in the videos not only use AAVE but also use a large number of curse words. Shalini, who described herself as "old-fashioned," reported that, although the language of the videos shocked her, she understood that Tamara was "trying to tell us that there is a community like this who uses English in a totally different form . . . like a different language" (August 6). Ultimately, she commented, the project helped her recognize the diversity in language use: "Now I know that there are lots of varieties [in the United States], and each one speaks a different—not a dialect, but they use words . . . differently" (August 6). This recognition of the coexistence of multiple varieties in an inner circle context is an important step in counteracting the mythology of the White native speaker using only "standard English" (Kubota, 2015).

The “we *was*” feature emerged more strongly in the discussion forum conversation between Ranmali and her groupmates, and it came up as a point of surprise for her in her interview. On the discussion forum, Ranmali initially oriented to this feature as a learner error: “In Sri Lanka, we identify such combinations, not as signs of social, but as errors that take place in the interlanguage continuum ... isn’t it an error?” Here, Ranmali is applying a deficit framing to the “we *was*” feature, interpreting it not as a choice but as an interlanguage error. Her New York groupmate responded to this post by emphasizing that “we *was*” is a feature purposefully used to fit in with certain social groups. In her interview, Ranmali noted that this was the first time she had realized that “such things happen,” that these “native speakers” might “break the grammar rules,” purposefully deviating from what she identified as standard, “broadcaster” English:

Until uh we started our discussions, I thought this is only a problem related to Sri Lanka this translanguaging and all these things. ... then I realized this is natural everywhere in the world this is happening ... so why not in Sri Lanka?

(August 6)

These direct confrontations with features of AAVE, both in the reading and in discussion with their New York peers, seems to have opened up for these students an alternative way of understanding deviation from “standard” English: not as an interlanguage error or a problem, but as a speech style and part of a natural process of language localization. This move, in turn, opened up for Ranmali the possibility of acceptance of local variation: If new norms are set everywhere else in the world, “why not in Sri Lanka?”

Visualizing Multilingualism

As part of the linguistic landscape portion of the project, both groups of students collected and shared images representing the language diversity of their neighborhoods. These visualizations of the broader landscape, in conjunction with the person-to-person relationships developed through the video introductions and discussion forums, were an important part of breaking down the image of the United States as a monolingual and racially homogenous society.

Both in New York and in Sri Lanka, students’ images often showed side-by-side translations in official signage, as in Figures 1 and 2. Students on both sides of the exchange expressed surprise at language diversity in the linguistic landscapes. For some Sri Lankan students,

New York’s diversity appeared foreign, a contrast to the narrower multilingualism of Sri Lanka. Gehan called the linguistic landscape images “an eye-opener” to the benefits of “living in a multicultural society,” and Ramya reported that she enjoyed the project because “what they had, as a linguistic landscape, was totally different from what we had” (August 2). Yet for other students, the diversity disrupted notions of U.S. monolingualism. Nelum was startled by the images that one of her group-mates posted from Koreatown: “It doesn’t look like New York, it must be in China or somewhere ... [with] some street signs only in Korean it didn’t feel like, this is America? Are you sure? [laughs]” (August 2). Seeing signs exclusively in a non-English language, she jokingly questioned whether, in fact, “this is America,” demonstrating how starkly in opposition to her image of the United States the images were.

For the New York students, in contrast, seeing the images provided by the Sri Lankan students demonstrated the prominent role English plays in Sri Lankan society. Although the New York students had read about and discussed postcolonial Englishes and about Sri Lanka in particular in preparation for the project, many students still reported being surprised at how much English was used. The images shared by the Sri Lankan students captured the side-by-side use of Sinhala, Tamil, and English that is mandated by government policy, as in Figure 3, as well as the use of English in informal signage, as in Figure 4. For the New York students, these images reinforced the theoretical readings about the importance and breadth of use of English in Sri Lanka. In a forum post, Tony commented,



FIGURE 1. Mott Street (Xing, March 6).



FIGURE 2. MTA (Louisa, March 6).

Taking a look at the Sri Lankan photos I see that all three languages are used frequently. I was very surprised, although this was told to me beforehand ... how much English is involved in the Sri Lankans lives. Seeing, truly is believing.

(March 18)

For both groups, the multimodal aspects of the project, both the videos and the linguistic landscape images, provided crucial support in recognizing—truly seeing—the linguistic diversity of the societies in which their interlocutors were living, helping students engage across linguistic and cultural distance (Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2014). Thus, for both groups the images pushed back against native speaker ideologies that portray English as belonging solely to monolingual inner circle settings.

Shared ESL Status

The video introductions and person-to-person discussions created further opportunities for direct challenges to the conception of inner



FIGURE 3. Underpass sign (Chinthika, March 8).

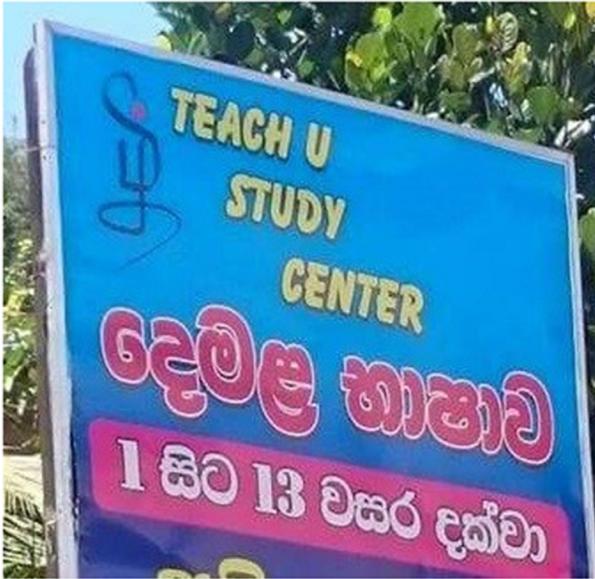


FIGURE 4. Teach U (Namal, March 9).

circle speakers as White, monolingual, and monocultural (Holliday, 2006; Shuck 2006). In addition to the excerpt that opens this article, students Chandana and Chinthika both described being surprised when viewing the self-introduction videos that “some of them were American while some of them were from other countries like China or Japan I think ... so then it is also mixed cultures” (August 2). Likewise, Lakshanthi commented that she expected, when she learned about the project, that the New York students would be “Americans,” but “when we were connecting I found that there were so many ethnicities in there” (August 11). The binary set up in these students’ descriptions is that of “Americans” as White and any other ethnic identities as non-American, again drawing on the implicit belief that “equates *native speakers* and *standardized English speakers* with *white people*” (Kubota, 2015, p. 352, emphasis in original). As the language of these comments suggests, the Sri Lankan students’ first encounter with multiple ethnicities in an inner circle setting did not fully disrupt that belief, but did raise their awareness of linguistic and racial diversity.

In addition, although not all the New York students identified as second language speakers, the discovery of some shared ESL status helped the Sri Lankan students overcome linguistic anxiety. Nelum explained that when she discovered her interlocutors were “also students that have come from other countries” she felt like she “had more in common” with them (August 2). Lakshanthi described how

after recognizing the “multicultural society” represented in her group, she “felt free ... some people are using the language like we use, so it’s easy for us to communicate with them,” especially because “even [if] we made some mistakes when compared with the native speakers ... they also make [laughs] such mistakes so it was at the same level” (August 11). Chandana commented that the English these students spoke was “very familiar ... because they’re also second language I think” (August 2), and Chinthika concurred that these students were easier to understand, because they spoke more slowly and “sometimes the pronunciation was the same” (August 2).

These students’ reactions are consistent with ELF research that emphasizes that one of the key components of successful ELF communication is the willingness to negotiate language differences—to “let it pass” when nonessential errors or miscommunications occur, in favor of a joint focus on accomplishing communicative goals (Jenkins, 2011; Seidlhofer, 2011). Fellow nonnative speakers are often perceived as less judgmental, more cooperative and supportive, and therefore less threatening. Rather than working against native speakerism directly, this shared identification as second language speakers of English activated the students’ sense of comfort with shared status.

Yet for the students who felt most anxious, this identification—the unexpected finding of sameness among those expected to be other—contributed something important to their growth. As Cook (1999) memorably pointed out, many L2 English speakers “resign themselves to ‘failing’ to reach the native speaker target” (p. 191), and nonnative-speaking teachers grapple with a resulting sense of themselves as lesser or illegitimate (e.g., Nuske, 2018; Park, 2012). In Sri Lanka, despite a growing acceptance of Sri Lankan English, mastery of British English remains an important source of social capital and a mark of prestige (Bernaisch, 2012; Ratwatte, 2012). For some students, then, the experience of nonjudgmental ELF interactions with these fellow nonnative speakers in the United States was in sharp contrast to their experiences in Sri Lanka.

One student, Nilanga, described how his anxiety over communicating with “native speakers” initially led him to edit his written work in the forum closely, because he felt he should “be a bit perfect” (August 11). Based on his few dealings with “snobbish” British people in his nongovernmental organization work, Nilanga reported that he felt “intimidated” by the idea of communicating with foreigners. He said (and Lakshanthi agreed) that “in Sri Lanka sometimes people laugh at us when we make mistakes,” but that in contrast, with their New York groupmates “we felt really easy to talk to them” because “even they have problems ... and I was not terrified to write them so I thought ok everybody makes mistakes in language” (August 11).

In other words, these interactions, by activating an ELF framework, reduced the students' anxiety at communicating in English across national borders. Bypassing the deeply ingrained local linguistic hierarchy and connecting directly to fellow nonnative speakers in the global center offered the students a chance to see that the inner circle others can also be "like us," destabilizing assumed connections between U.S. nationality, race, and native speaker status (Kubota, 2015; Shuck, 2006). For at least some students, this marked the beginning of a shift away from an identity as a speaker of flawed or limited English toward that of competent user of English.

Deconstructing "Superior" Language Ability

The same linguistic hierarchy privileging White native speakers that had caused such anxiety for the Sri Lankan students also shaped the beliefs of at least some of the New York students, informing their expectations about how the intercultural communication would go. Class discussions about the discussion board posts often reflected students' surprise at the "level" of the Sri Lankan students' English. For example, when asked in the interview what she found surprising about the project, Louisa replied, "When we got to know them it was really interesting to see how well spoken they are." Tony, in a forum post on another topic, commented directly on his partners' language: "I must say that you ... write extremely well" (February 26). Likewise, Nia reflected that she was deeply impressed by the sophistication of the Sri Lankan students' writing: "They spoke and wrote you know very very proper and honestly I haven't seen or heard a standard like that even in America today," her "even" implying a reversal of the anticipated linguistic hierarchy. These comments suggest that as with the U.S. participants in other studies (You, 2017; Zhang, 2018), these sustained encounters helped to challenge their assumptions of limited fluency on the part of foreign speakers of English.

This challenge was supported in part by the fact that this specific pairing of classes created unequal positioning in terms of academic ability and formality of writing. Whereas the New York students were undergraduates from a wide range of disciplines, the Sri Lankan students were enrolled in a graduate-level sociolinguistics course, with greater expertise in linguistic content. In addition, the Sri Lankan students chose to write much more formally, both because of a desire to be "polite" in writing "to different cultures," as Gehan reported (August 2), and because of a different understanding of the genre. Whereas the New York students were accustomed to writing casual, conversational short responses in academic online spaces, particularly

in this course, the Sri Lankan students tended to approach the assignments as short academic essays, a far more common type of assignment in their program. In many groups, the New York students used features associated with textspeak (emoticons), used informal expressions (*OK, cool, kind of*), and made editing errors such as missing apostrophes and homophone errors (*you're/your, they're/there*), which came across to the Sri Lankan students as either informal or even slightly careless, in contrast to their own English-teacher attention to detail. For example, in her interview, Ranmali noted that in her group, the Sri Lankan students discussed how “our academic writing is better than theirs. [laughs] ... we are so much concerned about our grammar, spellings and all, but uh when we look at their writings, we realize they are not much worried” (August 6). The discussion forum exchanges, by exposing these different positionings, provided evidence to both groups that the Sri Lankan students had “better academic writing,” at least under these circumstances, and thus provided an important challenge to native speaker ideologies that automatically position the inner circle speakers as the English experts (e.g., Holliday, 2006).

POTENTIAL EFFECTS ON APPROACHES TO TEACHING

For at least some of the Sri Lankan participants, the linguistic landscape project together with the intercultural communication spurred shifts in their understanding of language in society and prompted changes in their approach to pedagogy. As with other linguistic landscape work (Malinowski, 2018), the project prompted students to consider the balance of the languages in their environments and how it deviated from official language policies. For example, Ramya reflected on the difficulty of accessing government and medical services in a Sinhala-speaking area for the Tamil-speaking minority, and Gehan agreed:

I think we can really educate society [about this issue] ... you see this and you realize, oh my god ... things are so convenient for me, but, you know, for the rest of the marginalized, or the minorities, it's crazy.

(August 2)

The recognition of their privilege as speakers of the majority language, together with noticing the deep inequalities in the distribution of languages, some teachers reported, created more empathy for their students both as language learners and as individuals. Shalini, who described the project as inspiring, said she now pushed herself not to make assumptions about students' abilities based on their backgrounds—that “looking at the student and knowing from what school

and from which area doesn't mean that that student doesn't know English" (August 6).

Finally, some of the teachers also reported that the project had helped them place a greater emphasis in their own pedagogy on communication across varieties of English, in part because they now saw how dynamic the English language is. Namal observed that he found that "the language in the society changes regularly" (August 6), and he would need to see this from exploring language "in the field" rather than in books. Ranmali noted that "language is changing so [as a teacher] I have to adapt myself to the changing culture" (August 6). Shalini commented that as a teacher she needed to be "armed with the knowledge" of what is happening with English in diverse contexts, and that her students "need to know that language is used in different forms in different places ... they need to have this exposure" to diverse forms (August 6).

Lakshanthi stated this heightened awareness most clearly, describing her goals in teaching after completing this project:

We are communicating not only with our people but also we have to communicate with others. ... Sri Lankan use English one way ... and Koreans using another way and Chinese using another way, so whatever else my students needs to communicate to have connections with some global people and try ... to learn their culture and how they use English language.

(August 11)

These reflections suggest that after the project some participants saw the necessity of including dialects other than the inner circle standards in their classroom, as a way of preparing their students for the diverse communicative situations they will encounter—a small shift away from a standard language ideology that prioritizes a native speaker accent and toward an EIL or ELF model. This is a valuable first step, but it is far from universal, and whether these shifts in beliefs will have actual impacts on their classroom practices requires further study.

CONCLUSION

As Holliday (2006) noted, "the undoing of native speakerism requires a type of thinking that promotes new relationships" (p. 386). Online intercultural activities, because they involve direct, sustained contact with speakers of other varieties of English, can build those relationships and support awareness of diversity. In this multimodal exchange, the critical discussions of the local language varieties and the sharing of linguistic landscape images acted as an eye-opener to

linguistic and racial diversity in English in the United States. For both groups of students, the project offered the opportunity to visualize the multilingualism of an unfamiliar location. Person-to-person communication in this supported forum enabled at least some Sri Lankan students to overcome the intimidation they anticipated about conversing with imagined native speakers. By finding shared ESL status, students were able to relax into a collaborative ELF perspective (Seidlhofer, 2011), to gain confidence in themselves as users of English, and to confront assumptions about the automatic superiority of inner circle English speakers—all part of claiming a positive nonnative-speaking teacher identity (Park, 2012). Perhaps most importantly, when seeing unfamiliar forms in use, students have the chance to ask, as Ranmali did, “Is it an error?” and in so doing begin to recognize the legitimacy of diverse forms of English. These individual shifts in awareness do not by themselves disrupt the larger linguistic hierarchy that privileges White, middle-class, inner circle Englishes across the field of ELT, perpetuated by language learning materials, second language acquisition research predicated on native speaker targets, and broader discourses connecting standard language to economic and social privilege (Cook, 1999; Lippi-Green, 2012). All of the students in this study will have to work within this hierarchy, particularly given their complex postcolonial linguistic heritage. Yet they may be able to do so with a more critical eye and greater confidence, working toward claiming their nonnative teacher identity (Kiczkowiak et al., 2016; Park, 2012).

The positive effects described here could potentially support movement toward an ELF or EIL model by working to broaden the standards or varieties teachers are willing to accept in their own classrooms (Floris, 2013; Galloway & Rose, 2017; Matsuda, 2012). However, whether that shift will impact their pedagogy in practice remains to be seen. Further study on the impact of such projects should include surveys of students’ language beliefs before and after the project and direct observation of participating teachers’ practices over time. Future work might also consider how such a project might function in teacher training in other contexts, either postcolonial or EFL, where local varieties of English are less established and teachers may have stronger anxieties about their language abilities or nonnative status.

Teacher educators wishing to implement similar projects should keep several practical considerations in mind: selecting locations that provide sharp contrasts in varieties of English and therefore a novel experience; the difficulty of coordinating activities across large time differences, which led us to select asynchronous communication; the accessibility of digital platforms across institutions; platforms’ ability to support the sharing of large files like videos and photographs, which led us to choose the commercial site Flickr for linguistic

landscape images; designing prompts for activities that center around exposing and understanding language diversity in both contexts; and providing examples and guidance for linguistic landscape projects, including helping students conduct productive analyses of linguistic landscapes in spite of orthographic differences across languages (for more on the challenges of this project, see Schreiber & Jansz, forthcoming). Finally, these activities should be built into an overall curriculum aimed at raising awareness of native speakerism and its effects in ELT, which might include readings that problematize native–nonnative binaries or analysis of teacher recruitment materials (Kiczkowiak et al., 2016).

Intercultural, multimodal exchanges can set the stage for developing “intellectuals who will be prepared and committed to questioning the native speaker fallacy” (Kiczkowiak et al., 2016, p. 1)—both those who identify as native and as nonnative speakers. Disrupting native speakerism in ELT is, after all, a two-way street; it requires all of us involved in this enterprise to be willing to recognize our assumptions and work to overcome them.

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