

## Do I need to sound like a 'native speaker'?

This is the transcript for Series 3, episode 3 of the TeachingEnglish podcast. You can find out more about the words highlighted in the transcript in the show notes for this episode.

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

native speaker, English, teaching, language, ELT, non-native speaker, English language teachers, English language, native English speakers, lingua franca, pronunciation, social justice

Welcome to Series 3 of Teaching English with the British Council: the podcast for English language teachers around the world.

In each episode we look at a critical contemporary issue in the world of ELT.

Teaching English with the British Council

'I feel more confident when I teach English because I learned it and I had **to go from scratch**.'

'When people say they want to sound like a **native speaker**, my immediate response has always been "Which one?"'

'You also have to prove yourself all the time, but at the same time you kind of bring awareness that it's not just native speakers who can teach English.'

'The ELT community need to recognise the value of having really good **accommodation skills**, being able to speak languages other than English.'

'We need to move away from this, we need to become much more tolerant of different languages within education systems.'

'It's important to be an effective communicator.'

Teaching English with the British Council

### This is episode 3: Do I need to sound like a 'native speaker'?

**Chris:** Welcome to episode three of Teaching English with the British Council. In this episode we'll be asking: do I need to sound like a 'native speaker'? I'm Chris Sowton, a native speaker of English.

**We'am:** And I'm We'am Hamdan, a non-native speaker of English. Would you like a cup of water?

**Chris:** Excuse me?

**We'am:** Would you like a cup of water?

**Chris:** I don't understand. Could you repeat that, please?

**We'am:** I'm trying to sound like a native speaker!

**Chris:** Oh, I see! Why are you trying to sound like a native speaker, We'am?

**We'am:** It's just an **inferiority complex**.

**Chris:** Do you really think you need to sound like a native speaker?

**We'am:** On the contrary, actually. I want to keep my accent because it shows my **identity**.

**Chris:** So what do we even mean by this phrase 'native speaker'?

**We'am:** It's a term, I think, that people refer to people whose first language is English. This often comes along with the assumption that native speakers are better teachers or more proficient users of English, regardless of their actual teaching skills, or the non-native speaker's fluency and expertise. But the term itself is not suitable, I would say, and it does have some colonial references when you say 'native' and 'non-native'. There are different types of English and different ways to speak English from, you know, different geographies. Not everyone's Language 1 is English. So the different ways that people speak English in, is also English.

**Chris:** You use a phrase there like 'Language 1'. We could also say 'home language' and so on like that. So there are different terms which can be used, but we've chosen the term 'native speaker' for this episode because it's the more well-known phrase, but as we'll see, as we go through this episode, we will push back against some of those ideas and look more at how we can have a more democratic understanding.

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In our first interview today, we'll be talking to **Professor Jenny Jenkins**, the emeritus professor of Global Englishes at the University of Southampton. She was also the founding editor of the ***Journal of English as a Lingua Franca***.

**We'am:** Hi, Jenny. I was talking to Chris actually before the episode and I was telling him that we call this episode: do I need to sound like a 'native speaker'?

**Jenny:** Do you need to sound like a native? I mean, does anybody need to sound like a native speaker? I mean, when people say they want to sound like a native speaker, my immediate response has always been 'Which one?' They often then say 'Well, I want to sound like you'. I mean, and I say 'Well, why would you want to sound like me?' When they have a problem saying which one, I point out to them that people who speak English like me, or even any first-language speaker of English, we're a tiny, tiny minority of English users in the world. After saying 'Which one?', I say 'Why?', because if you really do want to blend in with native English speakers in a sort of native English-speaking environment, it's of course your choice. If you feel that's the most useful type of English, you can aim for it. You probably won't ever sound the same as a native English speaker, but you're better to aim for a range of English. It's learning to understand a range of other ways of using English and learning the skill of accommodation. Accommodation, that is, being able to adjust the way you speak English so that your English is clearer to people who don't speak it your way. And for me, those are the two key aspects of being able to use English pronunciation in a way that will communicate with the most people.

**Chris:** It's interesting you said about the term 'native speaker', which is in the title of this episode, because we thought about what we wanted to call it, and do we use, like, say 'L1', 'home language', different terms and so on, but 'native speaker' is still such a commonly used and known and understood term, certainly in the work I've done overseas, training, teaching, etc. It's still such a strong thing, though, that people want to do, I mean, I completely agree from a power dynamic perspective and all those things about the issues with that term, but people want to speak like native speakers. That's what they see is the goal, and it's always been quite a hard conversation I've had to have with people about that because, as in a privileged position of as being a – quote, unquote – native speaker, for me to say 'You don't need to sound like this'. It's kind of coming from a privileged position. So it's something I've always had an issue with myself.

**Jenny:** Yeah, I've been accused of being patronising. I'm patronising non-native speakers because I'm saying, you know, 'OK, I'm OK, I've got it. But you don't. You haven't got it and you don't need it, and you probably can't have it.' It really is people's choice what they want to sound like. There are native speakers of English who I know in Singapore, for example, and they're Singaporeans and they don't speak RP English or some sort of native type of English from the US. They speak with their local accent. You know, native can be all sorts of things. I mean 'non-native' is, is so often used as a derogatory term.

**We'am:** Can you explain what **global English** or Englishes are and, in particular, your work on **English as a lingua franca**?

**Jenny:** For me, 'global English' is, and always has been, an umbrella term, a sort of cover term for all the Englishes that are used around the globe, around the world, and I would always start with the largest group, who are the group of people who use it as a lingua franca, a language of communication with other people who don't speak their first language. When I first started, and started talking about it, giving conference talks about English as a lingua franca – for short, we call it ELF. The second group of speakers, the largest, would be people in post-colonial countries. So these are the second group of global Englishes used in places where the British and the Americans colonised a couple of centuries ago. They didn't give up English when they got rid of the British and the Americans but they kept it as their official language. That's why 'native', another reason why 'native' is such a poor term. And then the small group is the native English-speaking group. Basically the UK, tiny group in Ireland, the US, Australia, New Zealand and a tiny group in Malta. For the largest group, I always use 'English as a lingua franca', but I would say 'English as an international language' is intelligible.

**Chris:** Do you see then, the way the current ELT, we could probably call it industry in many ways, the sort of gatekeeping function of standard English or **prestige English**, whatever we want to call it?

**Jenny:** Do you know, I was asked this question back in a conference in 2015, by a very well-known assessment expert, that she gathered from what I had said that I didn't see any role for **standardised English language testing**. And I said yes, that was right. And, I mean, a gasp went up. No matter how much you teach people native English, they don't have it. They have their own version of English, which is influenced very much partly by their first language and partly by the Englishes of the people they're speaking with, because mostly they're speaking with people who have other first languages than their own or English. There's, you know, they're using it as a lingua franca.

**We'am:** Your first language is English. Do these dynamics become different when the teacher's first language is not English?

**Jenny:** Yeah, I mean, if I go back a long time now to my second book, which was on attitudes and identity to English as a lingua franca, and I interviewed lots and lots of people from different first languages and I found a tremendous ambivalence among them. So their identities were, I mean, I had two questions which brought out this tremendous contradiction. So I would ask them 'If you could wake up tomorrow morning and you could have any accent of English in the world, which one would you choose?' And every single one chose a native English accent. OK? Later in the interview, I said to them something like 'So would you like to keep your accent or would you like to change it?' And almost all of them wanted to keep it and, I mean, for example, an Italian student, she said 'I'm an Italian. I'm proud to sound Italian. I'm proud of my accent.' And I got this from the Chinese, the Japanese, the Taiwanese, I mean, the German, they all, almost all, wanted to keep this. There is this huge identity problem. So on the one hand, because they're presented so much with how native English is best, they feel they need it. On the other hand, they are who they are. They have an identity and they want that identity. But if you go on to opportunities, that's tricky because native English speakers have a strong vested interest in prioritising native English. That makes native English speakers the experts. They then get the best jobs and there's, there's discrimination goes on, because you see still see loads of adverts that either say 'native English speakers' or, if they realise that this now breaks some kind of rule, I think, I think it's not allowed in some adverts. I don't think it's allowed in higher education, for example. So what they do is say 'must have', and in the must-haves it's things like Cambridge diploma. They know that most people who do that are native English speakers. They do something where they think that most people who apply will have to be native English speakers.

**Chris:** I've also seen the term used as a code for ethnicity as well to mean white native speaker.

**Jenny:** Yeah, yeah, exactly. Exactly. That sort of thing still goes on. I think because English is being used so much more, the increase has been massive among non-native English speakers. So that range of ways of using it is increasing, the range of other languages of the speakers is increasing. And I think this is, this is being noticed. Native English speakers are realising or starting to realise that they're not the experts. They have poor accommodation skills. I mean, native English speakers use **idiomatic language** that nobody else understands except themselves – you know, things like 'it's another kettle of fish'. They find it very hard to substitute that with something that would be more intelligible. Often monolinguals, so can't switch in and out of languages, the change will have to be that the ELT community need to recognise the value of having really good accommodation skills, being able to speak languages other than English. The natives need to educate themselves in both those things. But I think this is happening naturally. I think if you were to do this interview in ten years, I think things might have changed quite substantially.

**Chris:** Well, we look forward to that invite, in ten years' time to catch up with you again, Jenny, when we're on Series 14, hopefully, of Teaching English with the British Council. But for now, thank you very much.

Wow, that was really interesting from Jenny there, lots and lots of information to think about. What are your reflections, We'am?

**We'am:** It's really interesting, and hearing that also kind of brought some previous experience. I was thinking, I taught monolingual classes, so I mostly had Arabic speakers. And there was this question always ringing: how do I sound like a native speaker? Which is funny because people who are learning Arabic, they don't ask how do I sound like a native speaker? So it does come from, like a social justice perspective.

**Chris:** And why do you think your students wanted to do that? What was their perception of that? Why were they saying that to you?

**We'am:** I think for students who are learning English, and it's not their mother tongue or Language 1, there's so much pressure for them to achieve high scores, and somehow they link those scores with pronunciation or with the way they sound, so there's this extra effort to put for them to succeed and then maybe find better job opportunities, if they're applying for **IELTS**, or if they are applying for universities in the UK or in the US. So this idea that I need to sound like a native speaker in order to be successful, in order to get a better opportunity. That's the way I view it. It's like a non-native learner has to work double the work in order to achieve what someone who's native language is English. And what, that's what Jenny also said.

**Chris:** I was really interested in was Jenny's talking about accommodation and how speakers can really listen to each other, to listen to other non-native speakers of English and work out ways, work out strategies of how they can communicate effectively. And that's something which we explored a little bit in **the previous episode about teaching vocabulary and grammar more communicatively**. It's not about being – quote, unquote – accurate, because what does that accuracy mean? It's about being understood. And that's the key thing. It's about the competence in the language or the ability to function in the language rather than using countable/uncountable nouns correctly. Or if you make a mistake between past simple and present simple, does that really matter? The emphasis is on can I be understood? Can I understand others?

**We'am:** Part of it is you want to communicate fluently, but you want to keep the accuracy. But for students who want to pursue, let's say, a degree outside their countries, then they have to be very accurate in what they say and that's why they are afraid to make mistakes or there is an, like, a sort of obsession to sound like a native speaker.

**Chris:** The feedback which teachers give students, whether that's formative feedback or summative feedback, very often that feedback is things like 'WW/wrong word' or 'tense' or 'article'. It's those small bits of grammar which are easy to pinpoint and identify, rather than actually looking at the whole text, looking at what the purpose of that text is. And I think that's, that's a real problem.

**We'am:** I think that the skill of being autonomous, being an autonomous learner, is very important. And for me as someone whose first language is not English, I developed throughout the years these techniques where, for example, if you say a sentence that I don't know, and it's more like—

**Chris:** Like 'it's a different kettle of fish'.

**We'am:** Yes, exactly. Then I write it down or I just keep it in my head or I ask, it's simply. The first time I taught in a multilingual classroom, it was here in the UK in London, and it was a difficult experience, something different for me, because I was used to monolingual classrooms, but this was different, because sometimes also, you don't know what ... Language is also culture, so sometimes you don't know how to deal with the different cultures. And although the English would, like, unify you in the class, because this is the medium to speak, I found the dynamics a bit different. And I think it's important to reassure the students from the very beginning, even if they don't ask, to tell them that you don't need to sound like a native speaker or that is not the end goal by itself.

We are now going to hear a selection of views on the subject of native speaking from our teaching colleagues in the teaching English community on Facebook, who have been listening to the podcast.

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'Do I need to sound like a native speaker or have a native-like accent?' is a question I get asked all the time as an English teacher by my students, but also I get asked the same question by the teachers I work with on teacher training courses. I believe you don't need to sound like a native speaker, you just need to sound accurate. And for some of the teachers and the students who ask the question "But how do I improve my accent? How do I improve my pronunciation?", I normally say "You need to work on your pronunciation rather than your accent". So one of the tips I give them is to listen to authentic texts as much as possible – songs, movies, news on the BBC channel, for example – or to check the pronunciation of the words they are not sure of using an online dictionary, like, for example, the Cambridge online dictionary.'

'So do I feel I need to sound like a native speaker? Sound like who? Like Her Majesty the Queen or the President of the USA or a surfer from Australia? I don't know, so many choices! My friend from Scotland told me that he faced criticism for not sounding native enough because he didn't speak like the Queen! I mean, we live in a crazy world. So, yeah, my answer is no. I don't want to eliminate my individuality and cultural background. I love accents. And when I was living in Toronto, I enjoyed a wide variety of accents. Around 60 per cent of the population there are immigrants, for example, and they celebrate this diversity. I think the key here is intelligibility: how clear I am, how effective I am, if I'm getting things done and I build authentic relationships.'

'I don't think that I need to sound like a native speaker. However, I believe that I need to try my best to be comprehensible as an English teacher so the students can understand me well. And sometimes I need to try to use the English that the students find familiar to their ears instead of speaking like a native speaker, which is quite difficult to understand, especially when it comes to accent, when it comes to the pace of their speaking. And the same in writing, sometimes I need to write it as simple as possible, grammatically correct but still make it a familiar to the students' understanding.'

'I found this pressure more when I was younger, and it was an external pressure, never internal one. Now I just ignore this pressure and I don't even try to sound like a native speaker. As an examiner for different international certificates, I know it's not about this. It's about being intelligible and being a good communicator. However, as a teacher educator, I can see how many teachers around the world put huge undue pressure on themselves to sound like native speakers. And this pressure is so big that it may impact their overall performance. They sound unnatural. I try to remind them of David Crystal's theory of Englishes and encourage them to contribute to the local English or to this global English that we create together with their local accent, with idioms or vocabulary or structures that belong to their cultures.'

**Chris:** Thanks to the British Council for sourcing these comments from the TeachingEnglish community on Facebook. There will be more opportunity to hear the views of teachers and practitioners in future episodes of the podcast.

**We'am:** In our second interview, we'll be talking to **Ana Jović**, a language specialist and also a teacher of English and Serbian and a native speakerism buster!

**Ana:** Nice to meet you.

**We'am:** Nice to meet you too. What do you say to students or parents who say to you that they want to sound like a native speaker?

**Ana:** Well, the first thing I do is ask them 'Why?' They often don't have a definite answer. They need some time to think, so I have an impression that they feel a need to sound like a native because everybody wants to sound like a native. They usually say 'I want to understand movies better', and then they say 'I want to be competitive in the job market', 'I want to make sure that native speakers understand me'. So

these are the most common answers they give me. And then what I do next, is asking them more questions, like 'Do you know that there is a higher chance you will talk to non-native speakers in your life than native speakers?' Because, you know, there are many more non-native speakers than native speakers. And then I ask them 'What native speaker you want to sound like? Is it an American native speaker or maybe British native speaker and if you want to sound like a British native speaker, what accent do you want to have?' So they are really confused when I ask them these questions, and this is, you know, what I do because I want to educate them that it's not important to sound like a native speaker. It's important how you communicate. It's important to be an effective communicator, intelligible communicator, not native speaker, because even uneducated native speakers sound like native speakers, but they can't express themselves well.

**Chris:** Some of this confusion, Ana, comes in the different understanding of what an accent is and pronunciation.

**Ana:** Yeah, well, **pronunciation and accent**, it's not the same, though students usually think it's the same thing. Pronunciation is very important for communication, but accent is no, right? So you can have any accents, you know, that exist in the world and you can still communicate effectively, but if your pronunciation is not clear and correct, people will not understand you. So pronunciation is how you say a word, if you say it correctly or incorrectly. An accent has nothing to do with that. It has to do with intonation, how your voice goes up and down. It has to do with stress, how you stress certain parts of your sentence, and it has to do with place or and manner of articulation of particular sounds. So, for example, I come from Serbia, and Serbian 'th' is not the same as English 'th'. So the difference is not that big, but it still exists, and even if I speak English the Serbian way, I will be understood, but if I mispronounce words, nobody will understand me, whether they are native or non-native speakers.

**We'am:** And in what ways do you think we can promote celebrating different forms of English in the classroom?

**Ana:** Teachers can do a lot, and it all depends on teachers' attitude. Teachers are those that actually choose what can be done in class. First, and maybe the easiest thing they can do, is to pick materials that promote this linguistic diversity that features speakers and texts from different cultures. Teachers can also start discussions with their students where they will talk about different variants of English and how all of them are equal and equally valid. So there is no correct variant of English. Teachers can also use technology, for example, and online platforms to join their students with speakers of different variants of English and that's how they can immerse them in that interaction, where students can use their variety of English to communicate with somebody who has a completely different variety of English and see that communication can take place even if you don't sound like a native speaker.

**Chris:** Do you find still in lots of textbooks there are native speakers of English who are used rather than non-native speakers?

**Ana:** Well, I think that was the case before, but I think these modern coursebooks, they actually are trying to promote different variants of English. Recently, I've been doing the new *English File*, published by Oxford University Press, and there you can hear speakers in listening activities who speak different variants of English – native and non-native ones.

**We'am:** Do you think that students' attitude toward native opposed to a non-native English teacher influenced the learning environment?

**Ana:** While students usually have more positive attitudes to native speakers, because that's something that's desirable in the market, I think it's very important to teach our students that even non-native teachers can bring a lot to them and to classrooms. And non-native teachers, they were also learners once and they also know, they can even recognise what struggles students have when they learn English, and they can help with that, while maybe a native speaker cannot always help.

**Chris:** In my experience, sometimes non-native speakers can feel a little bit shy or embarrassed, maybe, of leaning in to saying 'I can understand the issues. I can understand the challenges because I faced them myself.'

**Ana:** Why would you be ashamed of the struggles you had? Because actually that's something that can empower you, and your perspective on learning the language can actually be beneficial to your students. I don't have that problem, and I think my students appreciate it when I suggest some ideas and strategies how to overcome an issue. And I think that non-native teachers and their perspective is really valuable. For example, when they learn grammar, they have to dissect everything and, you know, put it all together, while non-native speakers don't do that. I'm also a teacher of Serbian as a foreign language and I know what it feels like to be a native speaker of a language that you teach. I feel more confident when I teach English because I learned it and I had to go from scratch. So, yeah, that's why non-native teachers are a really an asset in an English classroom.

**We'am:** I agree with that. Because also it's much easier to teach English than Arabic, which is my native tongue. But how do you feel we can make changes from more of an institution level to promote equitable hiring practices for non-native English teachers?

**Ana:** Well institutions can do a lot. First and foremost, maybe they can change this narrative that they use in job descriptions, advertisements, marketing and promotion because 'native speaker' is the top phrase, the most frequently used phrase. The second thing they use often is, you know, the country of origin, and then qualifications are third. I would love to change this narrative if possible, to use 'We look for qualified English teacher'. The other thing is also to promote their services differently. They usually promise students to teach them to sound like a native and speak like a native. Maybe they can actually tell them 'We can help you become an effective communicator. We can teach you how to communicate with a wide variety of speakers in English', so something along the lines of that.

**Chris:** So one way of doing that is through, for example, top-down legislation to make things like using phrases like 'native speaker' illegal in those sorts of adverts. But another way is a bottom-up approach, where native speakers can maybe offer more support, or the ELT community as a whole can help to change that kind of narrative. What do you see happening in that space now and what do you think could happen more in the future?

**Ana:** I would love to take an advantage of this question and thank all my native colleagues. All native teachers who have been very supportive. There are two kinds of native teachers: those who support non-native teachers and, unfortunately, those who feel endangered by this dialogue that should battle native speakerism. But, on the other hand, we have so many supporting native teachers who understand what it takes to become a teacher, all this education, what you need to go through and how much time you have to invest in becoming a teacher. So they support this a lot. So what they can do is just be allies, and they can also start open discussions in their classrooms with their students, promoting and advocating for inclusivity and equity and diversity. That's what they can do. For example, on social media, on LinkedIn, I'm very active about native speakerism. And whenever I post something, I get a lot of support from native teachers.



**Chris:** I guess one final thing to say on that, though, is one of the challenges, we need to do a piece by educating parents more in this as well. If we look at it from a market perspective of customers in that way, because there's still that very strong sense that if I'm spending money on my child's English language education, I will get a better product from a native teacher. And as long as that persists, there's going to be a market and schools which promote that. So that's also a, I think, one of the really big challenges the ELT community faces.

**Ana:** It takes a lot of educating of all the stakeholders in ELT. Everybody needs to get more education – non-native teachers, native teachers, employers, students and their parents. So, you know, we have to deconstruct this native speakerism and we have to demystify it and shed more light on native speakerism, but it has to start with teachers themselves, because lots of non-native teachers suffer from internalised native speakers, where they believe they are really not enough. So first we need to educate ourselves and then we should help employers get educated too, and when employers change their marketing strategies and the way they promote their services, maybe parents and students will actually look for a qualified, competent teacher with good teaching abilities and skills, instead of a native speaker who only speaks English like a native and that's all.

**We'am:** Thank you so much, Ana, that was really great. I'm glad that you are the one fighting for this.

**Ana:** Thank you so much.

**Chris:** So, We'am, some really interesting thoughts from Ana there. I found it very positive, but still lots of work to do.

**We'am:** Yes, and she did mention that it is not just one person's job but it's rather the whole community's job, from parents, educating parents about this, the students, maybe staff in schools who are native versus non-native. So it's a process of learning and unlearning at the same time.

**Chris:** I think that's a really good phrase, the 'unlearning' part, and I think, it seems to me there needs to be some kind of mechanism, some top-down mechanism that stop people from having these biases in recruiting teachers, but that also we do as a community need to change, and people who are supportive of these changes – native and non-native teachers alike – need to push this forward, need to work together to try and create a better ELT community for all.

**We'am:** Yes, and also a lot of it goes back to what Ana said is a teacher's attitude and challenging these misconceptions. I know sometimes it's difficult when you are a non-native teacher and then you also have to challenge the misconceptions and to prove yourself all the time, but at the same time, you kind of bring awareness to the students that it's not just native speakers who can teach English.

**Chris:** Yeah, I think it's also tied in to issues such as **multilingual education** and also the medium of instruction, which is used where, you know, so many schools, so many systems now favour English as a medium of instruction and so on, as their preference for that and I think this can just go throughout the system and we, we need to move away from this. We need to become much more tolerant of different languages within education systems, otherwise we're not providing the best possible education for our students.

**We'am:** Because at the end, what's the aim of education if it doesn't teach you that you should treat people equally not according to their, you know, speakerism?

**Chris:** Exactly, so coming back to the original question of our episode, We'am: do I need to sound like a 'native speaker'? What's your response to that question?

**We'am:** Definitely not. The answer is definitely not. But I want to question why do you want to sound like a native speaker? So much of it the answer is understanding the underlying reasons. You do not need to sound like a native speaker, but you definitely need to be clear and to make your message understandable. Your language should be to the point, communicative and that's it.

**Chris:** It's not always easy to have those conversations with students or parents, but I think we would encourage our listeners to have those conversations if you're in that sort of similar situation, similar position to do that.

**We'am:** Yeah. And it's also not easy to talk about this topic among professionals, ELT professionals, because some of them are native, non-native, so it's sometimes contested area.

**Chris:** Absolutely. And I think you can feel quite lonely sometimes if you have a particular view like this, depending on the situation, the context that you're working in. So, again, we'd encourage people who feel like that to perhaps get involved in a digital space where you can share some of those views. And, as Ana said, she's very much an advocate for that online. And we've put some links in the show notes where you can also get involved in those campaigns.

**We'am:** Thank you for listening to episode 3 of Teaching English with the British Council.

**Chris:** In the next episode, we'll be looking at the link between artificial intelligence and English language teaching. Until then, goodbye.

**We'am:** Goodbye.

Teaching English with the British Council