

now, after decades of involvement in the English teaching industry, that advice resonates deeply with me.

I've come to realize that without an open-minded mindset, no matter how extensive one's vocabulary or grammar knowledge may be, true understanding remains elusive. Communication might occur, but genuine comprehension does not. It's ironic that I only recently fully grasped the true significance of that teacher's early advice, especially in a world where distortions and misunderstandings seem all too common.

Although those words of wisdom are precious, the challenge lies in how I can convey their true significance when learners are inclined to opt for an easier path or simply prioritize the convenience of using language apps. This is indeed the dilemma we currently confront.

I actively engage with AI technology, and overall, I find it quite beneficial. However, this doesn't mean that I've lost my enthusiasm for practicing reading and speaking in English. In fact, I cherish the beauty of learning, and it's something I

English has never been just a practical skill; it has always been about personal growth.

never want to forgo. While cultural understanding, cognitive benefits, and personal growth are invaluable, I find myself pondering whether these can still be attained through the easier route of automatic translation on AI-powered devices.

My intention here is not to be stubborn or resistant to embracing what we commonly refer to as "innovation." Undoubtedly, the world is progressing towards "better, faster, and more convenient" solutions. In this evolving landscape, I can't help but question the meaning and purpose of "learning." It's a perplexing dilemma. In this context, what significance does "learning" hold or need to offer? It's a whole new chapter for us ELT experts.

KOTESOL IC 2024: Featured Speaker Interview

“Native-Speakerism Is an Ideology That Benefits Western ELT Institutions”

Dr. Robert J. Lowe, Ochanomizu University

Robert J. Lowe is a professor at Ochanomizu University in Japan. Prof. Lowe is a featured speaker at our upcoming international conference in April. He will be presenting a featured session on "Native-Speakerism and (Dis)empowerment: An Autoethnography of Success and Failure in Language Teaching and Learning." He will also be conducting a featured workshop on duoethnography in ELT. Recently, Prof. Lowe provided The English Connection with the following interview. — Ed.

The English Connection (TEC): First of all, thank you for lending your time to do this interview for *The English Connection*. Would you begin by giving us a bit of background information on you before you began your career in Japan?

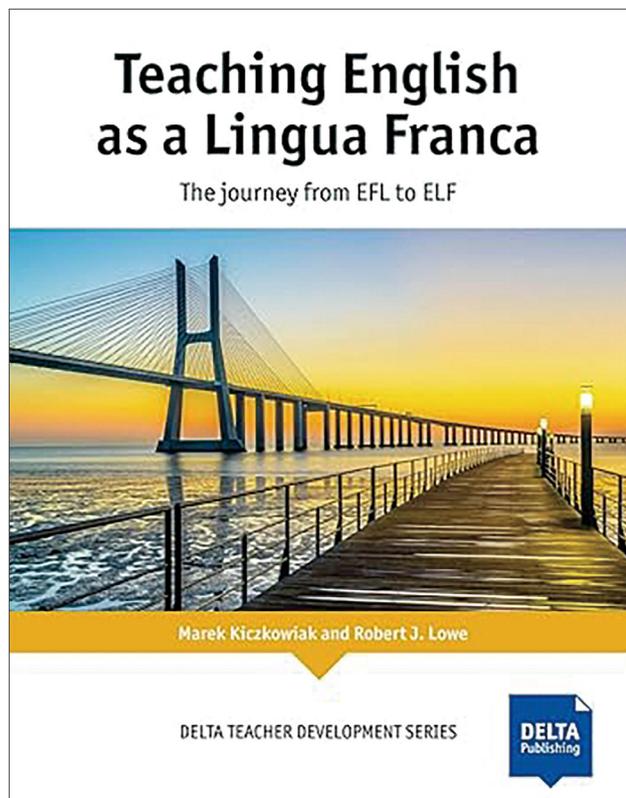
Prof. Lowe: Thank you for the invitation. I am originally from the town of Heanor, which is in the county of Derbyshire in the UK. I come from a family of educators, with many of my relatives having worked in schools both in the UK and overseas. At university, I originally enrolled as a student in the English department, but after a year of miserably trying (and failing) to diagram sentences, I decided to transfer to the sociology program instead. This was a much better match for my interests, and I graduated in 2008. Like many young graduates with an interest in travel, I decided to enroll in a CELTA course, and soon after finishing, I was given the opportunity to teach in an *eikaiwa* (English conversation) school in Japan at the age of 22. From there, my "native speaker" privilege helped open doors to part-time teaching in the higher education sector, and I capitalized on this through graduate school study to eventually get a faculty position.

TEC: It seems that many people who end up in the fields of TESOL and applied linguistics do not start out there. Your master's and doctorate degrees are both in applied linguistics. What was the impetus for moving from sociology into linguistics?

Prof. Lowe: I think it's important to distinguish between "linguistics" and "applied linguistics." I wouldn't call myself a linguist, as I don't study language directly. I think of applied linguistics as a field that studies "real-life language-related problems ... in diverse social, professional, and academic contexts" (Mahboob & Knight, 2010, p. 1), and for me this means studying critical issues in the field of ELT. My background in sociology is quite important here, as I would describe my research as something like the "critical sociology of ELT." In that sense, I didn't move from sociology to linguistics so much as combine the two. I initially became interested in studying applied linguistics academically due partly to a growing interest in the field that was slowly turning into my profession, and partly for the rather mercenary reason that it would open doors to jobs at the university level. The



development of a more sociological perspective in my work was due in large part to the influence of my PhD supervisor Adrian Holliday, who I believe was also quite influenced by his early study of sociology. One of the great appeals of applied linguistics to me is that it's a very broad church. People can work on such varied topics as SLA, discourse analysis, the history of ELT, the sociology of the classroom, and so on. I think some people worry that they may have to study TESOL or applied linguistics when their interests lie elsewhere, but for many of the most engaged researchers I know, their movement into the field has been a question of connecting their interests to the field, rather than choosing between them.



TEC: It's been a few years now since you published *Teaching English as a Lingua Franca: The Journey from EFL to ELF* (Delta Publishing, 2018) with Marek Kiczowski. In your introductory remarks to that work, you point out, in referring to the "set of interests surrounding critical issues" in our industry, that "despite the amount of scholarly ink spilled on these challenging issues, very little change had happened at the classroom level." Do you feel any changes in classrooms have happened since? If so, which among them are most significant to you? If not, what has prevented change from happening?

Prof. Lowe: That's a hard question to answer, as I don't have any real insight into what is happening in classrooms worldwide (and admittedly perhaps didn't when that quote was written!). There has been an increase in scholarly writing about ways to integrate issues such as World Englishes into the classroom (e.g., Galloway & Rose, 2018), and anecdotally, I know that I and many of my colleagues are making efforts to use more of our second- or third-language linguistic resources (either actively or passively) in the classroom. I think one major obstacle standing in the way of the kind of changes I'd like to see in English language teaching is the need for the language of learners to conform to social expectations. For example, Ramjattan (2019, 2022) has shown how accent reduction programs in the Global North are sold on the basis that they will provide learners with the kind of speaking style that is considered professional in the workplace. Here in Japan, there is intense pressure for students to pass entrance exams,

which typically require the mastery of particular forms of the language (which can sometimes even be slightly archaic; see Bredan & Goodman, 2020). So, in a way, I think some of the classroom changes we were encouraging in the book were a little idealistic. The book assumes that what should be taught in the classroom is language that facilitates intelligibility in international communication. However, it didn't really deal with the more structural and deeply entrenched systems in which teachers and learners realistically have to work. O'Regan's (2021) book on *Global English and Political Economy* provides some insight into this, as he suggests that the liberatory potential of ELF and translanguaging (i.e., the freedom they provide for speakers to creatively adapt the language for their own purposes and to express their unique identities) may, in fact, turn into a form of disadvantage, as such uses of the language may not provide the symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) required to access certain spheres of education and employment. This isn't to say that ELF, Global Englishes, translanguaging, etc., are not goals to which we should be aspiring but rather that realizing them might require changing more than just hearts and minds.

TEC: Your main session at KOTESOL 2024 is entitled "Native-Speakerism and (Dis)empowerment: An Autoethnography of Success and Failure in Language Teaching and Learning." Would you share your views on native-speakerism, and how do you deconstruct "(dis)empowerment"?

Prof. Lowe: I have elsewhere defined native-speakerism as "an ideology which privileges the institutions of the West in discussions around English language teaching (ELT), and by extension normalizes the models of English, the teachers of English, and the pedagogical approaches which are most associated with those institutions" (Lowe, 2022, p. 236). This means a great amount of privilege being afforded to "native speaker" teachers, resulting in greater ease of access to language teaching jobs. Those teachers considered "non-native speakers" are accordingly given less regard in the field, resulting in employment discrimination. Holliday (2005) talks about the attitude of "cultural disbelief," which I understand to mean a fundamental disbelief that non-Western people have relevant perspectives on language teaching, resulting in their voices being accorded less significance in the field. However, the key word here is "(dis)empowerment." In an upcoming chapter (Lowe, in press) on which this talk is based, I trace my own experiences of being a young language teacher in Japan and examine how the ideology of native-speakerism affected me as a "native speaker." While acknowledging the tremendous advantages I gained through my "native speaker" privilege, I also explore some of the ways in which the ideology paradoxically led to my professional disempowerment. This is due to the fact that native-speakerism involves the act of essentializing someone on the basis of a particular facet of their identity – in this case, my identity as a "native speaker" from what Kachru (1982) calls an "inner circle" country. I was prized as an "authentic" representative of English language

...native-speakerism is an ideology that benefits Western ELT institutions, leading to both empowerment and disempowerment for individual teachers.

and culture, which led to great professional advantages. However, the fact I was valued *only* for this part of my identity meant that I was not taken seriously as a language teaching professional, and was encouraged not to learn the Japanese language or assimilate into the Japanese workforce (a point also made by Houghton & Rivers, 2013). To do so would have been to take away some of the authenticity I was imagined to represent. So, native-speakerism is an ideology that benefits Western ELT institutions, leading to both empowerment and disempowerment for individual teachers depending on how they are categorized under this ideology, and the essentialized functions they are expected to fulfill.

TEC: You have been placing the words “native speaker” and “non-native speaker” in scare quotes. Why is that?

Prof. Lowe: This is a convention adopted by Adrian Holliday (2005) when he first started writing about native-speakerism. Within the field of ELT, who is and who is not considered a “native speaker” of English is influenced by a number of factors such as race and nationality, and so, I think it is important to indicate that we are not dealing with objective labels when using the terms, hence the use of inverted commas. It is important to separate this from the psycholinguistic question of whether there is an objective difference between being a speaker of a first or second language. I don’t intend to take a position on that. What I mean is that within the field of ELT, these labels are often used in a way that betrays a prejudice that only certain people from certain countries can be considered authentic “native speakers” of English. People who do not meet the stereotyped expectation of what constitutes a “native speaker” may face discrimination or have their professional status doubted, such as colleagues of mine who have had their speakerhood questioned on the basis of being British-born Chinese or coming from a country like Singapore. Nevertheless, it is necessary to continue using the labels when discussing these issues, as we must acknowledge the immense power they hold to include and exclude people from the profession.

TEC: Rather than dealing with autoethnography, your second session is a workshop on “Duoethnography in ELT: Research, Reflection, and Practice,” “duoethnography” being a relatively new term in the field of TESOL. Would you elaborate on what this workshop will entail?

Prof. Lowe: Duoethnography is a research method initially developed by Joe Norris and Richard Sawyer, which emerged from the fields of social, health, and educational research (see Norris & Sawyer, 2012, for an overview). In a duoethnographic project, two (or more) researchers engage in multiple iterative discussions in order to contrast the different ways in which a particular social or cultural phenomenon has manifested in their lives. The goal of such projects is to come to new insights or understandings of these phenomena that neither researcher would have been able to discover on their own. By using their own life histories as a site for ethnographic study, the researcher-participants are able to delve deeply into the impacts of the phenomena under study on their lives and thus to develop new understandings through contrast with the experiences of another. The goal of this kind of research is not necessarily to produce generalizable insights, but rather to complicate and problematize overly simplistic representations of concepts in the field. For example, Lawrence and Nagashima (2020) have used duoethnography to examine the complex intersections between different elements of their identities as language teachers, providing us with a much more nuanced understanding of the ways in which the unique interactions between race, gender, sexuality, and speakerhood can impact the professional identity construction of individual teachers. Further, it is hoped that the dialogic, narrative presentation of data common in duoethnography will resonate with readers

and thus help to communicate research results to audiences of academics and practitioners alike. It therefore aims to bridge the research–practice gap, at least to some extent. In this workshop, I plan to explain a little background about duoethnography and look at the core tenets that characterize it. Following this, I will show some examples of how it has been used in ELT as a research method, as a form of reflective practice, and even as a form of project-based learning with students. Finally, I will outline some of the dangers that new researchers (who may, understandably, be drawn to the method) ought to avoid when engaging in duoethnography for the first time.

...the dialogic, narrative presentation of data common in duoethnography will resonate with readers...

TEC: Will you be making your first trip to Korea for the conference, or have you been here before? What are your plans for this conference trip?

Prof. Lowe: This will be my first time in Korea, and I am very excited to learn about the ELT community here. I plan to attend lots of sessions so I can learn about the similarities and differences between my own teaching context and that of Korea. I am thankful to the organizers for the opportunity to attend the conference and am very much looking forward to it.

TEC: We’ll be looking forward to seeing you at KOTESOL 2024!

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Polity Press.
- Breaden, J., & Goodman, R. (2020). *Family-run universities in Japan: Sources of inbuilt resilience in the face of demographic pressure, 1992–2030*. Oxford University Press.
- Galloway, N., & Rose, H. (2018). Incorporating global Englishes into the ELT classroom. *ELT Journal*, 72(1), 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccx010>
- Kachru, B. (1982). *The other tongue: English across cultures*. University of Illinois Press.
- Kiczowski, M., & Lowe, R. J. (2018). *Teaching English as a lingua franca: The journey from EFL to ELF*. Delta.
- Lawrence, L., & Nagashima, Y. (2020). The intersectionality of gender, sexuality, race, and native-speakerism: Investigating ELT teacher identity through duoethnography. *Journal of Language, Identity and Education*, 19(1), 42–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2019.1672173>
- Lowe, R. J. (2022). Native-speakerism among Japanese teacher trainees: Ideology, framing, and counter-framing. *JALT Journal*, 44(2), 235–259. <https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTJ44.2-3>
- Lowe, R. J. (in press). Native-speakerism and (dis)empowerment: An autoethnography of success and failure in language teaching and learning. In L. Gurney & L. Wedikarage (Eds.), *Multilingual education yearbook 2024: Language education policies in multilingual settings: Exploring rhetoric and realities in situ*. Springer.
- Mahboob, A., & Knight, N. (2010). Applicable linguistics: An introduction. In A. Mahboob & N. Knight (Eds.), *Applicable Linguistics* (pp. 1–12). Continuum.
- Norris, J., & Sawyer, R. (2012). Toward a dialogic methodology. In J. Norris, R. Sawyer, & D. E. Lund (Eds.), *Duoethnography: Dialogic methods for social, health, and educational research*. (pp. 9–40). Left Coast Press.
- O’Regan, J. (2021). *Global English and political economy*. Routledge.
- Ramjattan, V. A. (2019). Racializing the problem of and solution to foreign accent in business. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 13(4), 527–544. <https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2019-0058>
- Ramjattan, V. (2022). Accenting racism in labour migration. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 42, 87–92. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190521000143>