Black teachers of English in South Korea: Constructing identities as a native English speaker and English language teaching professional

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This study uses critical race theory as a lens and narrative inquiry as a methodological tool to examine how the term native English speaker (NES) is socially constructed when subscribed to two Black teachers of English (BTE) working in South Korea’s secondary educational system. In addition to examining how these two BTEs interpret themselves as NESs, this study analyzes how being a NES influences pedagogical approaches in the classroom and their identity as an English language teaching (ELT) professional. Data from this study are taken from a larger research project comprising five participants’ ELT experiences as a NES in South Korea. Data collection consists of a questionnaire survey and Skype interviews as a means of reporting how these teachers construct their identities. Research shows participants navigating constructs of privilege and marginalization as a NES and ELT professional. Participants reported being cultural ambassadors of not only the English language but also their racial and ethnic background as Black Americans. Participants, also, attributed their identities as a NES and ELT professional to their ability to connect with the students, establish rapport, exchange cultural knowledge, and overall engage and educate students about cultures comprising the English language.
INTRODUCTION

The presence of a vast population of Black teachers of English (BTEs), working across the globe as native English speakers (NESs), necessitates scholarship describing their teaching experiences. While there are many research studies regarding definitions of a NES (Berger, 2014; Han, 2005; Holliday, 2005, 2008; Motha, 2014; Seargeant, 2012; Sharifian, 2009; Shin, 2007), within this study the definition of the term NES is aligned with South Korea’s English language teaching visa law that mandated, up until September 2015, that all foreign English language teachers (commonly referred to as NESs) be citizens of one of the following countries: Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, or South Africa. While problematic and racialized in nature, with regard to these countries being recognized as predominantly White societies, the paradox is that the aforementioned countries are all racially and ethnically diverse and anyone (from any background) who holds citizenship from one of these seven countries can be hired to teach English in South Korea as a NES. My argument is that there is minimum academic scholarship and narratives from BTEs who identify as NESs and contribute to the realm of English language teaching (ELT).

In 2019, the term NES is still used in job advertisements as a qualifier to teach the English language in South Korea (Han & Lonergan, 2019; Nam, 2019; Y. A. Park, 2019). BTEs are continuously hired as NESs, yet their pedagogy as NES and ELT professionals in the South Korean context continues to go either unnoticed or under-researched. “The dominant discourses surrounding race in ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) teachers’ contexts supported silences about racial identity, which created a challenge for teachers seeking to craft antiracist pedagogy” (Motha, 2014, p. 11). While there are several personal blogs (Miamor, 2014; Sophia, 2014; Timah, 2013; Wilkine, 2013) discussing the experiences of BTEs in South Korea, there must be more academic scholarship within the TESOL field substantiating their teaching experiences as NESs. Whether advertently or inadvertently, continuing to overlook scholarship from BTEs not only marginalizes their experiences as ELT professionals, but also perpetuates the stereotypical, monolithic, notion of a NES being White.

The increased influx of BTEs working in South Korea inspired my interest to study their experiences. The misrepresentation and absence of Black narratives and scholarly views within academia (Bonnor et al., 2014; Griffin, 2012; Hendrix, 2002, 2005; Orbe, Smith, Groscurth, & Crawley, 2010;) and composition studies led to a historic reaction by Royster and Williams (1999), who called for “a systemic commitment to resist primacy of officialized narratives” (p. 439). Officialized narratives, which are official standpoints acknowledged and received as primary, reliable, and credible experiences, within TESOL have not shed light on ways in which BTEs have impacted students’ worldview of NESs, how BTEs view themselves as NESs, and pedagogical approaches by Black NESs. Continuing to depend on officialized narratives and to neglect narratives of BTEs leads to a continuum of silenced, faulty, if not failed, (mis)representations of what BTEs have contributed to ELT. By examining BTEs working in South Korea and using critical race theory (CRT) as a lens and narrative inquiry as a methodological tool, I capture a better understanding of how they interpret their identity as NES, ELT professionals, and how both identities impact their pedagogy. Hopefully, through my research and more research to come, TESOL professionals will examine the significantly nuanced factors that are not only challenging students, but also guiding and advancing students’ understanding of English language cultures.

¹Due to trade agreements, the South Korea English language teaching (E-2) visa law requirements for prospective English language teachers have expanded to include English language teaching “experts” from Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, and India. However, the criteria for citizens from these four countries requires possession of an English teaching license and a bachelor’s degree in English, whereas citizens from the aforementioned countries need no such credentials.
This research study aimed to raise awareness of the presence and influence of BTEs working in South Korea as NESs and English language teaching professionals. This article is in no way meant to essentialize the experiences of all BTEs in South Korea or elsewhere, nor is it meant to generalize South Korea’s society or English educational system. The goal of this critical qualitative inquiry is to provide narrative snapshots of two BTE self-rendered identities as NESs and ELT professionals, and how their identities shaped their pedagogy while teaching in South Korea’s secondary educational system. The research outcome of this study provides academe with visibility of two BTEs working in South Korea as NESs by elucidating not only their self-interpreted identity but also their pedagogy. As a means of working towards my research purpose, I raised the following research questions:

1. How do two BTEs view themselves as NESs?
2. What are the self-perceptions of two Black NESs as ELT Professionals?
3. How does being a Black NES and ELT professional influence pedagogy?

2 | REVISITING THE NATIVE SPEAKER

Scholarship presented on ELT in South Korea has historically been expressed from a binary aspect of native speaker versus non-native speaker or “Western” culture versus “non-Western” culture (Ahn, 2011; Cook, 2009; Holliday, 2005, 2008), in which the characteristics of the individual teacher, except nationality, become unknown and/or disregarded; the default is presumed White. The dictionaries White and Western are typically used interchangeably and reinforce an ideal NES (Cook, 2009; Holliday, 2005, 2008). Using the term NES to replace the individuality of the English language teacher overlooks the originality and character of the person. Holliday (2005) labeled NESs working outside of their home country as Anglo-troopers of linguistic imperialism promoting native-speakerism by portraying English monolingualism (a single homogenous culture and language) as the norm, the native speaker as its upholder, and the English language and its Western teaching methodology as ideal. However, Holliday seems to have overlooked the diversity and heterogeneity of NESs that are non-White, particularly BTEs (Curtis & Romney, 2006; Flynn, 2015), who may not be promoting concepts of native-speakerism. My attempt in this study is not to discount the work of Holliday nor perpetuate the dichotomy of native versus non-native English speakers. However, reflecting on historical accounts, namely the work of Holliday, I intuitively examined whether BTEs are promoting native-speakerism as the norm in their pedagogy by engaging in dialogue about their teaching experiences in South Korea.

Current research still terms and studies NESs as a holistic group of Westerners tantamount to the characteristics of Whites (Ruecker & Ives, 2015). Similarly, non-native English speakers (NNES) are studied as non-White (Houghton, Rivers, & Hashimoto, 2018; G. Park, 2017). Therefore, it was rather intriguing to hear the teaching experiences of self-identified NESs who are not White.

I would be remiss if I did not point out the privileges of a NES. Meeting the first criteria of the South Korean English language teaching (E-2) visa requirement by holding citizenship from one of the seven countries within the Occident is certainly a privilege. Qualifying for the E-2 visa signals that one speaks English as their dominant language and bears citizenship from either the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada, or Ireland. So it is not only the citizenship that privileges BTEs to teach the English language in South Korea but also the language they speak. Moreover, individuals who plan to teach the English language in South Korea must be educated with at least a bachelor’s degree, despite the field of study. However, government-sponsored organizations, such as the English Program in Korea (EPIK), require a bachelor’s in education. If the
bachelor’s degree is outside of education, then the completion or current enrollment of a 100-hour or more TESOL certificate is required. This indicates that professional credentials pertinent to ELT, while significant, are secondary for a NES.

Despite the privileges afforded to NESs who teach or have taught the English language in South Korea, some BTEs, while privileged as NESs, face marginalization due to their racial background and/or skin color (Bonner et al., 2014; Curtis & Romney, 2006). Some of those prejudices entail BTEs not being viewed as who they identify themselves to be, such as a U.S. citizen or NES, simply because they are not White (Curtis & Romney, 2006; Holliday, 2008; Kubota, 2002; Kubota et al., 2005). Scholars such as Holliday (2005, 2008) and Kumashiro (2000) have consistently associated those who are not White, but whose first language is English and come from Western societies, as the NES Other. The term NES Other automatically denotes that whoever does not fit within the category of White is abnormal and is not associated with the English language. The term NES Other presents the idea and has constructed a form of inauthentic identity that non-Whites, although citizens of Western societies, are illegitimate NESs. For Schuster (1990), the term Other is a prescriptive and imposed term by a dominant society onto marginalized groups, namely Blacks, Hispanics, and social and economic outcasts, who are to be excluded from understanding themselves and their place in the world. In essence, individuals, especially within academia, who accept and adopt the term Other to refer to non-Whites have aided in a discourse that oppresses and excludes a people. “Discourse, which is manifested through language, consists of a system of beliefs, attitudes, and values that exist within particular social and cultural practices. Engaging in these language practices (such as conversing, analyzing, and writing reports) shapes an individual’s identity” (Danielwicz, 2001, p. 11). Therefore, I will not perpetuate discourse of the term NES Other to refer to participants of this study, as doing so promotes the idea of exclusion and oppression.

Acts of exclusion and oppression have led to a number of post-structuralist discourses, such as the NNEST Movement, that call for both NESs and NNEs to form an alliance “establishing professionalism, teacher education, and equity in hiring and workplace settings” (Selvi, 2014, p. 596). There is also a post-native-speakerism discourse in favor of discarding the term NES as illegitimate and irrelevant, because the term has historically, and in some cases currently, privileged NESs as most suitable to teach the English language, despite professional credentials (Aneja, 2016; Houghton et al., 2018; Rudolph, Selvi, & Yazan, 2015; Yazan & Rudolph, 2018). The overarching goal of such current movements within ELT are made in an attempt to eradicate inequity within ELT and faulty beliefs of NES superiority on the basis of language alone. There is no denying unearned privileges prescribed to NESs (Berger, 2014), but further exploring the hierarchies of privilege within the realms of NES certainly reveals factors of marginalization, specifically in terms of race. These factors of marginalization undermine notions of what being a NES has historically meant and what it means now, particularly to BTEs negotiating and carrying out pedagogy as NESs.

Engaging in dialogue with two BTEs and using critical race theory as a lens provided insight on ways in which they render their identity as a NES and ELT professional, and how these encompassing identities influence their pedagogy in the South Korean context.

3 | CRITICAL RACE THEORY AS A LENS

Critical race theory (CRT) is a suitable lens to use in capturing the experiences of BTEs in Korean society, because it honors experiential knowledge of people of color as truth and recognizes individuals who have been historically marginalized because of their race. The perpetuities of NESs being imagined as White upholds two CRT beliefs: Whiteness as property—English language teaching jobs
being reserved for White NESs; and permanence of racism—hierarchical structures within the ELT paradigm that privilege Whites as the ideal and authentic NESs most suitable to teach English (Matias, Viesca, Garrison-Wade, Tandon, & Galindo, 2014). Although this study focuses on participants who racially identify as Black, it is not meant to limit these participants’ experiences nor judge the outcome of their experiences solely based on their race; it also combines their teaching experiences in relation to the English language and discourse ideologies with which they are associated. According to Creswell (2006), CRT has three main goals: (1) present stories by people who do not identify as White; (2) analyze race as a social construct and attempt to eliminate racial oppression; and (3) address other hindering and attributing factors influencing the individual experience, such as being a NES working as an ELT in South Korea. Using CRT as a lens enabled me to share the experiences of BTEs by detailing ways in which forms of racism have not only impacted their self-interpretation as NESs within South Korea but also their pedagogical approaches as ELT professionals.

CRT encourages dialogue that welcomes change and transformation on the basis of social justice and self-awareness of a repressed people or society. The five rudimentary tenets of CRT are as follows: (a) the centrality of race and racism in their intersectionality with other forms of subordination, (b) the challenge to dominant ideology, (c) the commitment to social justice, (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (e) the transdisciplinary perspective” (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 63). I chose CRT as a lens to focus on the experiences of BTEs who believe that their lives were not only influenced by their race, but also by ideologies such as being the NES, the foreigner, the English language teacher, belonging to a certain nationality (or discourse), culture, and other social constructs that have impacted the ways in which they view themselves and their teaching experience. Within CRT, “culture … plays a central role in the production of hegemony and commonsense interpretations of everyday life” (Popkewitz & Fendler, 1999, p. 91). Within this study, the culture—“particular ways in which a social group lives out and makes sense of its ‘given’ circumstances and conditions of life” (McLaren, 2009, p. 65)—of BTEs became a key component, impacting how they interpreted their identity and teaching experiences in South Korea to the point where they assumed the identity of cultural ambassadors. As English language teachers, the English language aids as a backdrop for teachers to share and exchange their history, cultures, linguistic stylistics (e.g. African American Vernacular English), along with other factors that have shaped the ways in which they view their person. This, in turn, sparked potential production of hegemony. “Hegemony refers to the maintenance of domination … primarily through consensual social practices, social forms, and social structures produced in specific sites such as … the school” (McLaren, 2009, p. 67). Two examples of hegemony as a dominant force within South Korea’s society entail (1) Teachers willingly accepting to teach English in South Korea despite the preference for NESs as opposed to NNESs; and (2) the incorporation and upholding of an English-only curriculum, or English monolingualism, within South Korea’s educational system. By using CRT as a lens and engaging in dialogue with BTEs about their experiences, I narrate ways in which BTEs render their identity vis-à-vis hegemony, ELT, and race in South Korea.

Recent critical scholarship (G. Park, 2017; Rudolph et al., 2015; Yazan & Rudolph, 2018) in ELT has factored ways in which privilege and marginalization must be considered and problematized as a means of acknowledging hierarchical paradoxes within the ELT paradigm. For example, hierarchies of power within the NES construct recognize Black U.S. citizens as legitimate NESs and BTEs may be hired on the basis of citizenship and language use, but in fact many BTE are not hired and face marginalization due to factors such as race, skin color, appearance, and dialect (Bonner et al., 2014; Nero, 2006). On the one hand, Black NESs teaching in contexts such as South Korea are often positioned, both inadvertently and advertently, as the experts of the English language, thus providing them the privilege of being perceived as most suitable to teach English or first hired for the ELT position. On the other hand, although Black NESs may be presented this privileged opportunity as the expert,
this sense of privileged expertise is often questioned and/or reevaluated by students, students’ parents, Korean colleagues, or even themselves (Ipe, 2017; Jackson, 2016). These insecurities arise for many reasons, such as a system that privileges Whiteness and equates NESs to White individuals, and skepticism of visible minorities’ legitimacy as NESs (Curtis & Romney, 2006; Matias et al., 2014; Motha, 2014; Nero, 2006; G. Park, 2017; Romney, 2010). This is why CRT is used. “All of these constructs working together often lead to understanding how privilege and marginalization coexist as they relate to issues of power, privilege and (il)legitimacy of [the] English language” (G. Park, 2017, p. 11), race, and even English language education.

4 | ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN SOUTH KOREA

South Korea is well known as a nation whose primary focus is on education (Chang, 2009; Song, 2011; Shin, 2007). The huge emphasis on education can be witnessed by students who attend public schools studying from 8 am to approximately 10 pm, Monday through Friday, and sometimes on Saturday. The South Korean government views English as a necessary component for advancement and international competitiveness (Han, 2005; Song, 2011). Billions of dollars are invested by the South Korean government for the primary purpose of English language education within South Korea. South Korea’s Ministry of Education (MoE) earmarks billions of dollars annually just for educational expenses and is responsible for overseeing the national curriculum in primary and secondary education. Primary (Pre-K–sixth grade) and secondary public education (7th–12th grade) is completely free and compulsory. Hagwons, on the other hand, are private institutes that focus on target areas of study or emphasis on areas where students struggle in their regular classes and need improvement. Parents who can afford to send their children to hagwons spend thousands of dollars ensuring that their children receive the best education, despite the costs (Song, 2011). According to the National Curriculum of Korea, South Korea’s national curriculum for secondary education ranks mathematics, science, social studies, South Korean language arts, and the English language with the highest numbers of units to be taught, meaning that these subject areas are the primary focus in the classroom and on examinations.

The prominence of English language education within South Korea has remained a consequential topic for discussion, especially when there is a high demand for English language teachers and English language teaching (Han, 2005; Shin, 2007). The officialization of English language teaching in South Korea allegedly dates to the era of the Chosun Dynasty (Chang, 2009). However, during the Chosun Dynasty, the English language was taught and learned mainly for translation purposes, and for Korean diplomats who were expected to converse with individuals from predominantly English-speaking countries such as the United States. Since the late 1800s, the enforcement of the NES has been the common and perceivably authentic way for South Koreans to learn the English language (Chang, 2009). The NES was defined as someone of no particular nationality or culture who learned the English language as their first language and acquired it within their youth (Cook, 2009). Unfortunately, there is not much research on the characteristics, such as race or ethnicity, of an NES during the Chosun Dynasty so I cannot vouch that there were BTEs in Korea during the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, research argues that Koreans were taught the English language by a NES through the direct method, that is, grammar and translation, to enhance their literacy skills and English language proficiency (Chang, 2009; Shin, 2007).

The concept of the direct method is problematic, primarily because it is based on teaching ideologies from English-dominant Western societies, namely the United States and the United Kingdom. The direct method has been widely criticized by many scholars (e.g., Holliday, 2008; Norton &
Ramanathan, 2005; Sharifian, 2009; Warschauer, 2000) as a Western ideological imposition onto non-Western countries such as South Korea. One ramification of using the direct method is that only English teaching techniques from the West are appropriate, and NESs are most suitable to teach the English language because it is their native language. This ramification and ideology are faulty and very subjective, because the West and NESs vary in culture and teaching techniques. English language is a high commodity in South Korea, to the point where many South Koreans who do not learn the language do not advance economically or educationally either domestically or abroad (Cho, 2015). The demand for the English language is visible by the influx of NESs from Western societies, such as the United States, working as English language teachers. The presence and representation of BTEs working within South Korea’s educational system is extensive, though the experiences of these teachers have been heavily ignored, if not overlooked, within the NES paradigm.

5 | METHODOLOGY

I adopted the narrative inquiry framed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), which seeks to understand, determine, and examine ways in which historical periods, locations, and contexts shape individual experiences. “Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieu” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Additionally, CRT was used as a lens to identify ways in which race influences identity and experience. Using CRT as a lens legitimizes stories of “people of color” or those who do not identify as White, namely (in this study) Black. As with narrative inquiry, CRT values experiential knowledge as a substantial source of data.

5.1 | Participant selection and setting

As mentioned earlier, this study uses data from a larger research project comprising five participants. Due to word count limitations of this article, out of the five participants recruited I elaborate on the identities of two participants whom I will call Jamie and Nancy.

Jamie is a U.S. citizen in her mid-30s who has a bachelor’s degree in music and more than five years of experience teaching English to students of all ages in South Korea, particularly in the cities of Taebaek and Yongin. Nancy, also a U.S. citizen in her mid-30s, has a master’s degree in humanitarian action and more than three years of experience teaching English in Busan, South Korea.

I recruited participants by posting an invitation letter in a Facebook group titled Brothas & Sistas of South Korea (BSSK), a community mainly populated with people of color, particularly Blacks, who are working, have worked, or intend to work in South Korea. “It is geared toward disseminating information and networking with ‘our people’ while abroad in SoKo” (BSSK, 2016, para. 1). In order to be a part of this study, participants must have met the following criteria: self-identify as Black; have worked in a South Korean secondary school for a minimum of 1 year (twelve months); self-identify as a NES; and hold citizenship from one of the seven countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, or Ireland) mandated by the South Korean government.
5.2 | Data collection and analysis

Once consent forms were received, participants were asked to complete a Qualtrics questionnaire survey about their English language teaching experiences as NESs in South Korea. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire survey within a seven-to-ten-day time frame. After receiving all surveys, I scheduled semi-structured interviews, via Skype, with participants for follow-up questions and explanations of their survey responses. All semi-structured interviews took approximately 30 minutes to an hour to complete and an audio-recording was used to ensure that I captured the entire dialogue.

Because this article is meant to report how two BTEs construct their identities as NESs and ELT professionals, I used narrative analyses which Clandinin and Connelly (2000) frame as a three-dimensional space (3DS) inquiry. The 3DS approach entailed analyzing the “personal and social (interaction); past, present, and future (continuity); combined with the notion of place (situation)” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). In essence, the 3DS allowed me to analyze and narrate (a) each BTE’s self-rendition as a NES and ELT professional, (b) the different theories that relate to these experiences, and (c) the notion of being a BTE in South Korea. “The meaning of narratives comes from analyses or interpretations of the conversation” (Clandinin, 2007, p. 153). Therefore, engaging in conversation (dialogue) with BTEs regarding their identity and teaching experience also led to an awakening of common themes among participants. The use of 3DS helped me to determine patterns shared by the participants and construct a larger meaning of what this study implies vis-à-vis two BTEs’ identity in South Korea as NESs and ELT professionals, and how such experiences not only shape their pedagogy but also contribute scholarship to the field of TESOL.

6 | FINDINGS

In this section, I present data from both a questionnaire survey administered to participants that explicitly asks for their self-rendered identity as a NES and ELT professional, and a Skype interview exchange between the researcher and participants as a follow-up to their questionnaire survey answers. Cautious to not homogenize participants’ identity, I strategically address my research questions via chart to show how each of these teachers individually understand themselves as a Black NES and ELT professional, and how their identity influences pedagogy (see Table 1).

Because some of the provided participant responses may appear ambiguous or call for further explanation, I narrate these participants’ experiences by retelling bits of our Skype interview exchange. The goal of this narrative is to showcase not only how these participants justified their survey responses but also to determine patterns shared by the participants and to construct a larger meaning of what this study implies vis-à-vis some BTEs in South Korea.

6.1 | Jamie

Jamie’s self-rendition as a NES clearly coincided with that of a cultural ambassador, but which culture she represented or taught was uncertain. During the Skype interview, I asked Jamie to expand on her response as a cultural ambassador, to which she retorted, “I give them kind of like a warning, like the America that you read in your books is not the America that I live … the America that you’re thinking of, they do it this way, now the America I grew up in, we do it this way.” Jamie referred to the “American Dream” a “set of ideals stating that in the United States freedom includes opportunities to obtain prosperity, success, and upward social mobility through hard work no matter what an
**TABLE 1** Questionnaire survey responses to research questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant and Citizenship</th>
<th>RQ1: How do two BTEs view themselves as NESs?</th>
<th>RQ2: What are the self-perceptions of two Black NESs as ELT professionals?</th>
<th>RQ3: How does being a Black NES and ELT professional influence pedagogy?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Jamie (USA)</td>
<td>“Cultural ambassador. I not only instruct in the language that most people are familiar with, i.e., “standard” English, but I also share the other dialects or accents that I am familiar with using.” (Questionnaire Survey, 2016)</td>
<td>“I see myself as a cultural ambassador. I have learned about as much as I’ve taught. With each new learned skill, I incorporate in my lessons. Which helps my students understand more and relate more to the world around them.” (Questionnaire Survey, 2016)</td>
<td>“Being a BTE in South Korea, I have been the receiver of many compliments, insults, and misconceptions. Whether good or bad, my students “open up” to me. I am not only a teacher by profession, but I learn a lot about the world that I teach in, which is different from what I was brought up in. Each lesson helps me to understand how to interact with others, in and outside of my classroom.” (Questionnaire Survey, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy (USA)</td>
<td>“A native English Speaker of USA.” (Questionnaire Survey, 2016)</td>
<td>“I view myself as a professional in how I carry myself in the classroom and bring my cultural experiences in to help teach young learners.” (Questionnaire Survey, 2016)</td>
<td>“It has allowed me to open the gateway to teaching about experiences and cultural aspects as an African American in a foreign environment.” (Questionnaire Survey, 2016)</td>
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</table>
individual’s racial, religious, or economic background is” (Eliassen, 2015, para. 1) as an example to explain that students believed everyone in the United States is treated equally and provided with the same opportunities in terms of sociocultural and economic status. Jamie explained that she informed her students about the distinctive dialects of the English language in the United States, carefully explaining that when or if they visit the United States they will certainly encounter different accents, but that it will be English nonetheless. Jamie mentioned that Standard English (SE) is what her students are exposed to most often, so she wanted to be clear. Jamie’s pedagogical sentiments attempted to dispel a rhetoric of there being one monolithic way to use and speak the English language. This is consequential, as it speaks to the many differing cultures associated with the English language and dispels the notion of all NESs promoting native-speakerism and English monolingualism.

Jamie defined the ELT profession as “all-inclusive,” highlighting that to be a “good” teacher (or ELT professional) entailed including English language history and culture as well as other cultures and other nuances that make a language functional within the learning environment—for example, informing students about the origins of the days of the week, origins of gestures, why we say things such as “God bless you” after a sneeze, and significance of holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas where families gather to celebrate and give thanks. Jamie explained that she is not just teaching prescriptive grammar of the English language for students to attain; rather, she is creating an environment that fosters open dialogue regarding cultures through the English language and in which students are also able to share cultural knowledge via the Korean language. So, while Jamie was placed in a position of privilege to teach the English language and be a “cultural ambassador,” she used her privilege to also learn more about the cultural context in which she taught.

Jamie said that learning more about the Korean language and its linguistic semiotics inspired her to create lessons focused on how it is different and/or similar to the English language. Jamie explained how having a “meeting” with someone in South Korea was a euphemism for going on a “date” with that person, and that she must explain the difference to her students or else they will think that whenever she mentions having a meeting, her students will assume that she is going out on a romantic date. Jamie also pointed out that students are so intrigued by her ethnicity and hair to the point where she created a delegated speaking class focused on different hair types of different people. During the Skype interview, Jamie explained that as a NES she has a platform to teach about the English language and cultural associations, but as a BTE she felt responsible for teaching about cultural diversity, cultural differences, and her race, due to a lack of representation. Jamie discussed examples of students attempting to toss pencils and pen tops in her hair to see if they stuck, pointing out that she maintained her composure and, instead of becoming furious, used these moments as opportunities to explain to students why what they are doing is unacceptable.

Moreover, Jamie mentioned that she devised a program based on books that the owner of her school recommended, many of which required comprehension expansion. She talked about incorporating music and cultural things that happen to be Black history. She noted that she does not inform students that they are learning about Black history because she does not want the parents to think their kids are learning something useless or unimportant. Taken aback by her response, I asked her why parents would think in that way and she explained that, essentially, she does not know all the parents and she wanted to avoid conflict. Jamie described a time when one of her high school students told her that because she is Black she must have been from Africa. Instead of trying to prove where she was from, Jamie turned it into a learning moment, giving the student a scenario like, “If I said that you were Chinese, how would that make you feel?” Jamie noted that the student looked at her and said, “No, I’m Korean,” and she replied, “Well, you look Chinese, your language has Chinese characters, and some of your buildings are influenced by Chinese culture.” Jamie pointed out that once she began to open the discussion, it was only then that students started to understand their mistake, because they often associated having dark skin to be rooted particularly in Africa. Clearly, Jamie has structured her lessons according to the ways
in which she not only interacts with her students but also how she faces both privilege and marginalization. Lessons centered on both the teacher and students’ culture and context was a necessity.

6.2 | Nancy

Nancy defined a NES as someone from a predominantly English-speaking country, such as the United States or the United Kingdom. During the Skype interview, Nancy elaborated that because we (researcher and participant) are NESs from the United States, we can better assist students with improving their English accent and pronunciation. While I understand the concept and importance of pronunciation for comprehension purposes, the idea of improving an accent by being taught by a NES puts an ambiguous NES accent as the marker or ideal and accurate way to speak the English language, and it can also be ascribed to native-speakerism. Native-speakerism promotes a faulty, hegemonic, logic of English monolingualism that not only are NESs most suitable to teach the English language, but NESs are also teaching students to speak the English language with the same accent. If we are not careful, it becomes a mimicry with an imperialist undertone stating that to grasp English one must sound exactly like the NES. Moreover, there are a variety of accents from predominantly English-speaking countries, so the question becomes whose accent is most desirable to teach and/or learn.

In addition, Nancy defined an ELT professional as someone who not only teaches inside of the classroom but one who is also a cultural ambassador and brings forth unique experiences into the classroom. Interestingly, Nancy never mentions how her earned credentials honed her identity as an ELT professional or how the learning of South Korean culture contributed to her professional identity. Rather, Nancy focused her experiential knowledge as a way of enlightening students about African American culture, which she feels has been either mis- or under-represented. Nancy’s experience can be considered a prime example of what some scholars call privilege and marginalization coexisting fluidly (G. Park, 2017; Rudolph et al., 2015; Yazan & Rudolph, 2018). During the Skype interview, Nancy elaborated that being an ELT professional requires going beyond basic skills of teaching grammar and reading and writing; for her, it was more about bringing a bit of America to the classroom. Nancy recalled an experience in South Korea where one of her students wanted to study abroad in Chicago, but he was unsure due to media portrayals of Chicago being a dangerous city with lots of crime. Nancy explained that she put the student at ease by explaining what life is like, at least from her perspective, living and studying in Chicago and answering questions to assist him with his transition. Nancy continued by saying that her students were always curious about where she was from and her culture, so it became an important aspect of teaching garnered respect.

When asked what did this form of respect entail and exactly how being a BTE who identifies as a NES shaped her teaching experience, Nancy responded by reflecting back on the student wanting to study in Chicago. Nancy stated that the South Korean student informed her that he was afraid of getting shot, so she coached him through his fears and believes that, as an African American woman who lived in Chicago, she provided a sense of comfort to him. Nancy felt that the student learned from South Korea’s media that African Americans in Chicago were violent criminals. Nancy said that she felt proud having him overcome his fears because she was also the first Black person that he had ever met, so this is what she means by being a cultural ambassador—the ability to show students that media depictions of Blacks, particularly African Americans, is only one perception of an entire race of people. Nancy acknowledged that her student likely assumed that, because she is Black and has experience of living in an American city, particularly Chicago, the student felt comfortable consulting her for advice, especially in dire circumstances. Nancy explained that she did not have any problems explaining to students that there is crime and ways to avoid certain
situations, but most importantly, she felt that she enlightened students on certain experiences and stories of living in American cities, namely Chicago, that students carefully heeded and appreciated. From information gathered, Nancy was privileged to be a resource that taught students about circumstantial events that occur in some U.S. cities. However, Nancy was also marginalized in being pigeonholed as the expert to discuss crime in U.S. cities, since students ascribed crime and gun culture to her culture as a Black American.

7 | DISCUSSION

While CRT aided in legitimizing these participant stories by bringing forth intersections of privilege and marginalization through dialogue and experiential knowledge, narrative inquiry assisted with creating commonly iterated themes via participants’ experiences. The participants recognized that race does play an important role in how they are perceived and reported their teaching experiences as taking on the role as a cultural ambassador with a responsibility to represent cultural aspects from the Western world that have been either misrepresented or not represented at all. While discerning the identities of the two participants who self-identify as Black NESs and ELT professionals and how their identity influences their pedagogy, an overarching theme was mentioned by both participants—that of cultural ambassador.

According to Ozbas and Guryay (2014), a cultural ambassador is someone who metaphorically adopts many roles, such as a window to a different world, an explorer, a traveler, and so on. Ozbas and Guryay (2014) found that students saw English language teachers as not only cultural ambassadors of the English language, but also a vehicle through which students can gain insight into life from a different cultural context. One complexity of being a cultural ambassador raises the concern about which culture gets represented and if these representations are accurate. In many cases, the intersection of culture and race merges when English language teachers are hired to represent American culture, especially within the paradoxical NES paradigm. For example, BTE are hired as NESs yet are constantly reminded of their “Blackness,” either through student curiosity or some other reference, which inspires BTE to delve into topics regarding race and how racial diversification is an aspect of American culture. Furthermore, culture is rather fluid and dependent on one’s historical account of it, so being a cultural ambassador is something I would argue as a temporary personification comprising culture, race, and language. It is temporary given the circumstances of non-tenured ELT positions where teachers have the option, in most cases, of renewing their contract yearly or returning to their home country. Ironically, students are consistently being reintroduced to different cultural aspects, possibly different racial groups, and essentially different cultural ambassadors, all of which are associated with the English language.

Participants rendered a NES and ELT professional as someone who engages students by incorporating culture into the lesson, such as why certain holidays are celebrated, where English words stem from, and the diversity of the English language along with the people who speak it. To some, this form of pedagogy is recognized as culturally responsive teaching. For example, Gay (2010) defined culturally responsive teaching as “behavioral expressions of knowledge, beliefs, and values that recognize the importance of racial and cultural diversity in learning” (p. 31). With participants noting that students were thankful for being taught about diversity and varied cultures within Western countries such as the United States, a commonality between participants’ experiences was that they earned respect in the classroom when cultural knowledge was exchanged. As the data showed, participants were passionate about raising cultural awareness in the classroom. Pang and Gibson (2001) asserted that Black teachers are inclined to incorporate sociocultural issues in their teaching assignments that
have been historically marginalized or silenced in the classroom. Some teachers opt to have classroom discussions and lectures about civil rights leaders and their fight for equality, while other teachers believe that their presence alone interrupts a false notion of what Black people are and represent. “Black teachers are diverse and bring a range of views and instructional practices into the classroom” (Milner, 2012, p. 12). Participants in this study attributed their identity as NESs and ELT professionals to their ability to connect with the students, exchange cultural knowledge, establish rapport, and overall engage and educate students about cultures comprising the English language. Student reaction to the participants’ pedagogy was reported as rewarding by both teachers and students.

8 | CONCLUSION

Research continues to show that Black educators are forced into positions where they must denounce stereotypes, be “positive” representatives of their race, prove what they are not, and essentially be cultural ambassadors both abroad and at home (Foster, 1997; Pang & Gibson, 2001). Cox (2010) also affirmed that individuals across the globe are influenced by African American–inspired culture, such as hip-hop, and that a lot of what is learned and presented as facts come through media sources, rather than engaging directly with the individual. Thus, one of the implications of my research is to encourage BTEs to be more cognizant of their role as cultural ambassadors—who they represent and what they represent. “Teachers carry into the classroom their personal cultural background. …. Students likewise come to school with personal cultural backgrounds that influence their perceptions of teachers, other students, and the school itself” (Gay, 2000, p. 9). Therefore, BTE and prospective BTE must be mindful that they are both learning and teaching about cultures and that their job is not only to educate but also to become educated, lest they risk regurgitating the highly criticized rhetoric of the Westerner attempting to culture the uncultured, or similarly the NES imposing odious native-speakerism.

Considering the current trends and shifts of ELT and moving beyond native-speakerism in which we bridge privilege and marginalization, we must continuously seek purpose in what we do as educators, hiring managers, curriculum writers, language policy makers, and the like. Purpose allows us to implement effective pedagogy, hire credentialed teachers, develop meaningful curricula, and connect relevant policies with clear objectives. Careful of unjust impositions, those objectives must be mutually established with all stakeholders involved (Yazan, 2018). Ongoing ELT training with follow-up assessments (e.g. self-reflections, student evaluations) is crucial for educators working outside of their home context, because it not only strengthens the teachers’ pedagogy and identity as an ELT professional but is also a reminder of one’s purpose and whether that purpose is aligned with one’s established objectives. Additionally, ongoing ELT training provides security to teachers working outside of their home context in that they are not just on a paid working holiday (Ruecker & Ives, 2015) or recognized as having little significant value to students’ education, but that ELT is serious business in which they will be rewarded for their triumphs and held accountable for their shortcomings whether abroad or at home. Furthermore, ongoing ELT training must be transparent and open to engaging dialogue regarding race and culture that shapes teacher identity and pedagogy, especially for BTEs who blatantly experience acts of racism and/or racialized inequities.

Lastly, this research study provides a fertile space for further research opportunities vis-à-vis the complexity of how BTE view themselves as NESs and ELT professionals, and ELT hiring practices in the South Korean context. The term NES is highly complex, and in many cases racialized in nature. Both NESs and NNNESs can identify with the English language as their mother tongue and their culture. However, to dispose of the term NES essentially erases the identity of many who have been
unrepresented, underrepresented, or even misrepresented, especially within the ELT paradigm. For someone who has come to recognize the implications of what it means to be a NES and who identifies as Black, the term NES can also be understood as a personified encyclopedia, comprising diversified, multifaceted cultures and people associated with the English language. When the term NES is represented by those who do not identify as White, it is a reminder that the English language is diverse and so are its speakers. While I am not a fan of holistically eradicating the term NES, I am keen to re-evaluate and study how the term is constructed and interpreted by native-English-speaking minorities within the field of TESOL.

9 | THE AUTHOR

Quanisha Charles is a TESOL specialist who focuses her research on social justice in teacher education and English language teaching identities of native-English-speaking minorities. She grounds her research in narrative inquiry through the lens of critical race theory as a means of capturing individuals’ lived experiences and intricate identities.

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