Abstract

This article considers the rapidly expanding online market for English teaching. Drawing on interviews with 11 Filipino online English teachers and autoethnographic evidence, we examine how teachers feel under the conditions of precarity that define their participation in the gig economy for language teaching. In addressing the experiences of Filipino teachers, we introduce the notion of "discounted nativeness." Discounted nativeness describes Filipino teachers' ambivalent position within the online English teaching industry: platforms take advantage of their high levels of English—up to and including passing them off as American teachers—while the teachers experience discrimination and maltreatment by students and platforms alike. The article concludes by discussing the need for sustained research into the burgeoning market for online language teaching.

Keywords: Native speakerism, English teaching, TESOL, digital labor, gig economy, Philippines.

"We are cheaper, so they hire us": Discounted nativeness in online English teaching

Observing the rapid development of information and communication technologies and online platforms, Graham and Anwar (2019, n.p.) suggest that a "planetary labour market" for digital work is rapidly emerging. They observe, however, that rather than rendering geography meaningless, this global labor market is highly affected by geographically specific enablers and constraints (i.e., political, social, and technological). The present article explicates how these enablers and constraints contour the experiences of Filipinos employed in the locally influenced but globally distributed industry of online English teaching. Digitally mediated English teaching is a rapidly expanding global labor market, and the Philippines is emerging as one crucial node (e.g., Morales, 2020; Liu, 2018). Although Filipino teachers' English is often evaluated negatively compared with English instructors from countries like the United States and Canada, Filipino teachers' comparatively low prices allow them to compete with American and Canadian teacher in this market (Lorente & Tupas, 2013; Jang, 2018).

At present, there is little research about online English teachers in general (but see Manegre & Sabiri, 2020), let alone those who hail from the Philippines (but see Tajima, 2018). The absence of research on the topic is surprising given the overall magnitude of the multi-billion-dollar online English teaching industry, which employed tens-of-thousands of teachers even before the COVID-19 pandemic further boosted the industry (e.g., Costello, 2020; Xinhua, 2020). Addressing the relative lack of research on the topic, the current study draws on interviews with eleven teachers, supplemented by the first author's personal experience teaching 380 hours of English online for a Philippines-based platform. We consider Filipino online English teachers' experiences vis-à-vis linguistically fallacious and neocolonial notions of being a "native" speaker of English (Holliday, 2005; Lee, 2018).

Our findings reveal that teachers: 1) experience precarity as low-paid contingent workers within the global gig economy for language teaching; 2) face racial and gender-based discrimination related to their racial and linguistic identities; and 3) are sometimes forced by online teaching platforms to pass themselves off as native English speakers from the West. Our study contributes some of the first empirical findings about language teachers' experiences in the global online gig economy. In addition, our findings contribute to understanding how nativeness/non-nativeness and visibility/invisibility—two binaries often used to discuss English teaching and digital labor—are complexly intertwined in the context online teaching. For example, platforms' (in)ability to pass teachers off as native speakers depends in large part on whether the lessons take place via voice-chat or video-chat, with video-chat invariably revealing that most Filipino teachers diverge substantially from the idealized figure of the White native speaker teacher (e.g., Jenks, 2019; Ruecker & Ives, 2015).

The next section explicates the term native speaker and discusses English in Philippines. This is followed by a discussion the gig economy, both in general and in the context of the Philippines specifically. We then relate the study's methodology. This is followed by the results of the study, including a discussion of discounted nativeness. We conclude by considering the implications of our findings and outlining areas for future research.

Native Versus Non-Native Speakers

The issue of how, when, and whether a teacher is categorized as a native speaker is central to our argument. Therefore, an explication of the term native speaker is necessary. The term is highly contested within applied linguistics and related disciplines and scholars have long noted that a concrete definition of the term *native speaker* remains elusive (e.g, Davies, 2006, p. 431). Often though, definitions have coalesced around the age (e.g., very young) at which a

language is acquired Cook (1999, p. 187) writes: "the indisputable element in the definition of native speaker is that a person is a native speaker of the language learnt first" and notes that designation as a native speaker has traditionally been disconnected from questions of proficiency or expertise. In addition, scholars have noted that the term native speaker carries with a strong monolingual basis, implying that each person speaks only one language, which is be default their native language (Cook, 1999, p. 187; Dewaele, 2018, p. 236).

Crucially, while assumption that native speakers are monolingual persists (Cook, 2016) being recognized by others as a native speaker of English is in practice often unrelated to whether or an individual learned English as their first language. Instead, being recognized as a native English speaker is often linked to extra-linguistic attributes such as nationality and race. Braine (2010, pp. 9-10) observes that the most obvious ways in which native and non-native speakers are identified are "country of origin, names, ethnicity, skin color, and accent." In other words, being recognized as a native speaker of English is in practice linked to a whole host of considerations completely separate from command of the language itself. Such extra-linguistic assumptions reflect *language ideologies* (Silverstein, 1979; Kroskrity, 2010), which refer to beliefs and attitudes towards language use and language users.

One of the most dominant language ideologies in the field of English language teaching is subsumed under the neologism "native speakerism," which refers to the language ideology that (White) Western native speakers are the ideal teachers of English (Holliday, 2005, 2006, 2018). In this vein, Braine (2010, p. 9) observes that unlike the term native speaker, which denotes "a birthright, fluency, cultural affinity, and sociolinguistic competence," the term non-native speaker carries the burden of "marginalization and stigmatization, with resulting discrimination in the job market and in professional advancement." Likewise, Lee (2018, pp. 26-27) concludes:

"the assumed hierarchy of the native and nonnative speaker is an ideological construct driven by colonialist notions of cultural stratification and language ownership."

Crucially, there is scant empirical evidence to suggest that native speaker teachers are superior to non-native speaker teachers in any virtually any area of language instruction (Canagarajah, 1999; Levis et al., 2016). Nonetheless, a wide range of empirical literature documents native speakerism's continued prevalence within the English teaching industry (see Jenks, 2017, 2019; Jenks & Lee, 2020; Mahboob & Golden, 2013; Ruecker & Ives, 2015).

Here, it should be noted that we are sympathetic to Dawaele (2018, p. 239), who critiques the terms native and non-native speaker and advocates for their disuse due to the "inherent ideological assumptions about the superiority of the former and the inferiority of the latter." Nonetheless, while we acknowledge that the terms are highly problematic and linguistically misleading, we continue to employ them in this article for a number of reasons. First, we believe that only does this binary continues to animate much of the popular discussion around English teaching, but it also deeply contours how the teachers we interviewed understand the market for English language teaching. Second, the categories of native and non-native speakers are particularly important on, and reinforced through, online teaching platforms vis-a-vis algorithms and search filters, many of directly differentiate between the categories of native and non-native (Curran, 2020).

In suggesting that Filipino teachers can be considered discounted natives, we seek to highlight how the binary designation of native and non-native is troubled by Filipino online teachers even as the binary continues to contour the global market for online language teaching. Specifically, we argue that, in the context of gig economy English teaching online, nativeness can be conceptualized as unfixed, such that teachers' designation as native or non-native is

situationally and temporally defined. That is, Filipino designation as "native" is operationalized differently according to varying intersections of, and combinations between, platform, student, and teacher.

English in the Philippines

The Philippines' rising importance in the global market for online English teaching is a result of its complex colonial and post-colonial relationship with the United States. As a result of colonization, the Philippines is host to a large number of fluent English speakers, many of whom have experience working with overseas clients in BPO industries such as call centers (Friginal, 2007; Padios, 2018). Lorente and Tupas (2013) observe that although the Philippines is an increasingly popular (physical) location for English language learning, it sits within a (racialized) hierarchy of destinations that places it far behind more desirable locations like the USA, Canada, and New Zealand. Presaging the comments made by several of the Filipino teachers interviewed in this study, they conclude: "Philippine labor, here in the context of the teaching of English, is sought not because it teaches the most desirable variety of English, *but because it is cheap and affordable*" (p. 79, emphasis added).

Tupas (2019) discusses the colonial relations sustained through English and points out that not only do different national varieties of English belong to hierarchies of prestige and authority, but similar hierarchies exist *within* nations as well. Tupas and Salonga (2016, p. 474) highlight that it is Filipino call center workers' knowledge of a prestigious—relative to other Filipinos'—variety of English that allows call center workers "access to the material privileges of call-center work in the first place" (p. 475). In other words, the type of Philippine English that will allow someone to get a job in the call-center industry is a very particular variety, spoken primarily by the elite. This point is important, because although the Filipino teachers discussed in

this article suffer discrimination in the broader global market for English teaching, their English has greater market value than that of many other Filipinos, and thus their English abilities are less "discounted" than the majority of Filipinos.'

Given that designation native and non-native reflects ideology rather than language practice, we refrain from making any judgements about whether Filipinos should be categorized as non or non-native speakers of English. However, it should be noted that even the English of Filipinos employed in call center is often received poorly by customers (Friginal, 2007; Padios, 2018). In fact, many of these highly proficient speakers "seem to have internalized the view that as 'non-native' speakers of English, they are less-than-ideal speakers of the languages" (Tupas & Solanga (2016, p. 369). In other words, Filipinos are generally perceived by native speakers— and perceive themselves—as non-native English speakers. On the other hand, our empirical findings indicate that to at least some English learners, Filipino teachers can pass as (native speaking) Americans.

A few studies have previously discussed the precarity that Filipina teachers face in the online English teaching industry (Curran, 2020; Tajima, 2018). Curran examines the profiles of online teachers from the United States and the Philippines on a specific platform in which teachers can set their own prices. Curran highlights that although Filipino teachers tend to be highly qualified in terms of their teaching credentials, they command much lower rates on the platform than most non-credentialed native speakers. Similarly, Tajima notes the huge price disparities between taking lessons from Filipina teachers online and paying for lessons face-to-face lessons in Japan. Tajima highlights how Filipina teachers are sexualized by their Japanese male students, who describe "young Filipina teachers as 'a feast for the eyes'" (p. 106).

Tajima (2018) explicitly chooses to set aside issues of native speakerism in favor of a consideration of neoliberalism (p. 104). In contrast, this article contends that a consideration of both neoliberalism and native speakerism is necessary in order to make sense of Filipino teachers' "discounted nativeness" and their precarious position in the global hierarchy of English. That is, we acknowledge that both students and teachers are deeply affected by contemporary neoliberalism, especially the ideals of self-entrepreneurship that neoliberalism inculcates in the subjects which it produces (Shin & Park, 2016).

Gig Economy

The term "gig economy" generally refers to work that is contracted on a piece-meal (i.e., "gig") basis and which is facilitated by digital platforms (Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016). Gig economy platforms formally designate their workers as "independent contractors" rather than as employees. This designation allows the platforms to avoid a wide variety of employee-related expenses that traditional companies are legally obligated to pay, including a minimum wage (Aloisi, 2015; Prassl, 2018). Although the origins of the gig economy are often traced back to 2008, and the founding of Uber and Airbnb (Schor & Attwood-Charles, 2017), the gig economy reached global prominence in the decade 2010-2020. Although measuring the size of the gig economy is an inherently difficult task (Kässi & Lehdonvirta, 2018), the World Bank forecast that by 2020 remote gig work would generate gross service revenues of between $15 billion and $25 billion dollars (Kuek et al., 2015).

Recently, scholarship has started to more seriously engage with gig labor in non-Western countries (e.g., Anwar & Graham, 2020a, 2020b; Soriano & Cabañes, 2019, 2020; Soriano & Panaligan, 2019). Different from labor markets in high-income democracies like the United States or Germany, labor practices in low-income countries were often informalized and

precarious well-before the rise of the gig economy (Kalleberg, 2018). As a result, analyses of gig labor in low-income countries often highlight the unfavorable nature of alternative jobs. However, while the gig economy has brought much needed employment to many individuals in low-income countries, the arrival of the gig economy has not been a solely positive development for these workers. For example, Anwar & Graham (2020a, pp. 12-13) note that although the gig economy may offer better-paid work than is otherwise available, workers incur a host of material and social costs, including investments in Internet and computers, as well as depression caused by social isolation. Specifically, gig workers face enormous pressure to please clients, both because clients can in some cases withhold payment directly (Anwar & Graham, 2020a), and also because a majority of platforms base the algorithms they use to match workers with clients—and fire workers—on customer-sourced ratings (see also Chan, 2019; Rosenblat et al., 2017).

Digital Labor in the Philippines

Much of the literature on digital labor outside the West has focused on its invisibility (Casilli, 2017; Anwar & Graham, 2020a; Roberts, 2019). For example, Roberts' (2019) highlights the experiences of Filipino workers employed in the labor-intensive world of online content moderation. Although these workers perform the crucial task of keeping social media platforms free from violence and pornography, the workers themselves are entirely invisible to social media users, both literally and figuratively. Although they do not explicitly use the language of invisibility, Soriano & Cabañes (2020, p. 7) similarly observe that a common topic of discussion among online gig economy workers in the Philippines is how to build relationships with clients in order to secure repeat business or longer-term projects. In other words, Filipino gig workers strive to make themselves visible to employers and to speak with them directly.

However, invisibility can be an asset to online Filipino online English teachers. Afterall, visibility results in Filipino teachers being explicitly racialized and sexualized by students (see Tajima, 2018). In addition, when teachers are not visible (i.e., when their lessons are delivered via voice-chat rather than video-chat) some platforms pass them off as White teachers from the United States (see Findings). This is a major advantage to platforms, since White Americans sit atop the racialized hierarchy of English language instruction (Jenks, 2017; Lorente & Tupas, 2013).

In light of its role as a leader in BPO, it is unsurprising that the Philippines' has emerged as a crucial node in the rapidly growing digital economy (Soriano & Cabañes, 2019). Importantly, the Philippines government is a strong proponent of digital work, with Soriano and Panaligan (2019, p. 176) noting:

> The government sees platform labour as a complement to other forms of BPO work, an alternative to overseas labour migration, a catalyst for urban and rural development, and an attractive option for young graduates.

However, despite the government's rhetoric around digital work, it enacts few policies to support or protect digital workers (Soriano & Panaligan, 2019), especially compared to its proactive and patriarchal interventions in brokering Filipino overseas labor (Rodriguez, 2010).

Methodology

The primary data for this study comprise one-on-one, semi-structured, recorded interviews with eleven Filipino online English teachers, each of whom also completed a short questionnaire. Five of the teachers were interviewed twice and all interviews took place between March 2020 and January 2021. Participants were recruited from two Facebook groups specifically dedicated to online English teaching. The first author posted in the group and invited

participants to interview for an academic project. The first author conducted the interviews, made initial notes, and transcribed the interviews.[1] The duration of each interview ranged from a minimum of 33 minutes to a maximum of 120 minutes and were conducted primarily in English, with occasional use of Tagalog. Non-English portions of the interviews were translated by the first author. Like other workers in the gig economy, all but one of the teachers were employed on a gig-basis, whereby they filed taxes as independent contractors and are not guaranteed students or a salary. The sole exception was Maggie, who had a full-time contract at the time she was interviewed, but had previously worked on several gig economy teaching platforms. Participants names and relevant demographic details are included in Table 1 below.

Interpreting the Interviews

In analyzing the interview data, we acknowledge that interviews cannot be "lift[ed] out of the contexts in which they were gathered and claim[ed] as objective data with no strings attached" (Fontana & Frey (2000, p. 663). We subscribe to Rapley's (2001, p. 303) suggestion that the data obtained from interviews are "produced in and through the talk (and concomitant identity work) of the *interviewee and interviewer*" (emphasis in the original). That is, interviews are social encounters and not exact transcripts of events. However, while we acknowledge that our interviews do not exactly mirror the experiences of the English teachers we interviewed, we contend that they do reflect teachers' interpretations of their experiences, and as such offer crucial insights into the experiences of precarious workers employed within the online gig economy for language teaching.

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[1] As a result of a technological malfunction, four of the interviews were either deleted before they could be fully transcribed or were not fully recorded. However, the detailed interview notes kept by the first author allowed some many of the insights from these interviews to be saved. All direct quotes are from recorded interviews only.

Positionality

The interpretation of the interview data, as well as the broader arguments in this article, are richly informed by the authors' positionality. The first author is a Filipina woman, born, raised, and educated in the Philippines. The second author is an American man working in Hong Kong. The authors have never met each other in person, and their collaboration was supported—and occasionally hindered—by the same global infrastructure and technology that enables the global gig economy for teaching.

The study is further informed by the first author's experience in the online English teaching industry. Between 2018-2020, the first author taught 380 hours on one of the Philippines' largest gig teaching platforms. This first-hand experience with the online teaching industry helped not only guide the interviews, but also to contextualize and corroborate the experiences shared by the interviewees. The first author's status as a fellow Filipino online English teacher—and a woman—was crucial for building rapport and eliciting frank accounts from the teachers. Despite her "insider" status, the first author was forthright with participants about the academic nature of the project.

Organization of the Findings

Below, we offer an account of the systemic injustices and precarity described by our participants, including their experiences of being racially discriminated against by students and the teachers' practice—following the instructors of their employers—of deceiving students into believing that they are White Westerners. In recounting our participants' experiences, we begin by highlighting the control that online language platforms exercise over their teachers, in terms of surveillance, punishment, and evaluation—a finding consistent with other industries in the gig economy (Shapiro, 2018). Next, we relate how teachers are often forced to draw upon their own

(often meager) savings in order to buy the tools necessary for teaching online. The experiences related to precariousness are not necessarily unique to our participants, but pertain to gig work in general, which is by its nature precarious (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019).

After sketching out the situations of precarity experienced by our participants', we turn towards their experiences of discrimination from students and their accounts of being ordered by their employers to lie about their ethnic identities. We suggest that these latter two types of experience reflect Filipino teachers' status as "discounted natives" within the online English teaching industry.

All names used hereinafter are pseudonyms. For the sake of clarity, some filler words (e.g., "um," "oh," "like") have been excised from quotes.

[Table 1 approximately here]

Precarity

Surveillance, Penalties, and Performance Markers

Although online teaching ostensibly offers teachers freedom and autonomy, teachers related that the platforms exerted considerable control of them. Despite the fact that the majority of teachers work from home, they recounted that the platforms found multiple ways to surveil them. For example, on some platforms, lessons are recorded, and on others, managers drop into the classes to monitor teacher performance. In addition, teachers experience arbitrary fines and penalties. Often, these penalties are tied directly to some variation of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), which are linked to students' evaluations (ratings). For example, on one popular platform, if teachers are able to maintain high KPIs, in categories including

"Professionalism" and "Internet Connection," then they become eligible for small increases to their salary. However, low KPIs result in the temporary or permanent suspension of a teacher's account. On the platform on which the first author taught, if a teacher could maintain a high enough KPI (not easy, considering the challenges we lay out in the next subsection), then 250 hours of lessons would yield a $0.20 pay increase to the base pay of $2.48. Regardless of the platform on which they taught, most teachers related either having their already low wages garnished or having their account suspended for a period of time. The reasons for suspension ranged from cancelling class to having received low ratings. Ana, a teacher in her early 20s who lives in a rural area, had been so upset with the penalties at one platform that she quit and moved to a different platform with a less punitive penalty system. She explained:

> In [the first platform], 30 minutes before the class, you need to log in, but if you weren't able to log in, that's already minus 60 pesos on your pay [$1.20]…my salary should have been Php 10,000 [$208] for that cut off [period]. But my salary was cut down to only Php 2,000 [$42]. And the rest of my salary was divided into the adjustments and the penalties.

In other words, the vast majority of one of Ana's paychecks went to cover the cost of various fines she had incurred during that pay period.

Teachers were particularly bothered by platforms' refusal to grant any type of leeway to teachers cancelling lessons. Nicole, a woman in her late 20s from Cebu, provided a hypothetical example to illustrate the attitude of the platforms:

> Like, let's say, for example, one of my relatives dies. When I cancel it, they still gonna penalize you.

Summarizing the frustration of many teachers, Nicole concluded, "there are times I actually want to quit teaching…I hate the fact that the companies are controlling you."

Having one's account suspended could prove even more damaging than a fine, especially since most of the teachers' relied on teaching as their primary source of income. When a teacher's account is "closed" or suspended, they are unable to accept students for a given period of time. Teachers sometimes experience both fines and suspensions. For example, Mariel, a mother of three from the province of Cagayan, recounted how not only was she fined double her class rate for every class she missed, but her manager would also "close" all her bookings for the day so that she could not accept students. Mariel said, "in any job, there should still be repercussions if you don't do your responsibilities. But then their penalties are really unacceptable." Most frustrating for teachers, punishments can result from even a single complaint. Julia, who had taught on four different platforms over 13 years, explained:

> There was one parent who was not really satisfied with the way I handled classes with her daughter...and after that, the [manager who handles students' complaints] told me that she could no longer give me students and I had to reapply… it's just one complaint, and so I told her "I should reapply?" I mean, with just one complaint? The manager just told me that, hey, she's no longer going to give me the schedule... and then, so the next week, I had no students anymore.

Julia's quote encapsulates the frustration that many teachers feel towards online English teaching platforms. Julia was frustrated both because she had been unfairly penalized, and also because she was unable to make her case to the platform's management.

Both the low salary and the dismissive attitude expressed by the platforms can be partially explained by the enormous pool of would-be teachers. That is, platforms can easily replace teachers. Like the BPO industry, teaching English online is a highly sought-after occupation in the Philippines, and many platforms boast of their extraordinarily low acceptance

rates. Ana explained that her headset—which she rode a bus for two hours in order to procure—was bought from someone who had failed their final interview for an English teaching position. Further illustrating the extreme competitiveness of the industry, the first author, despite completing graduate work in English, failed to be hired by two different online English teaching platforms. Each time, the first author reached the final round of interview, and in both cases the issue of pronunciation doomed their application. The first author's experience yields two important insights. First, even when teachers are advertised as Filipino, it is an explicitly U.S. accent that is desired, and second, despite their relatively low pay, high demand for these jobs ensures that platforms can afford to be picky about the teachers they recruit.

In general, the English teaching platforms offer few chances for career advancement, and many teachers complained about the lack of pay progression. Often, the limited opportunities for pay increases that do exist come in the form of bonuses or step increases tied to student evaluations. Because bonuses require stellar reviews, they are difficult to earn. Ana explained:

> they call it bonuses—like they call it "oh, here are the benefits and then the extra money that you can earn" but it is nearly like a punch to the moon… If you have already one absent forfeited [lesson], even if it's just one day before the cut off, or one day you made the mistake [and] the student complained about you, they will immediately disqualify you for that incentive.

Here, Ana uses the Filipino slang "punch to the moon"—which refers to something that is nearly impossible—in order to describe the likelihood of receiving a bonus. Platforms' use of both bonuses (carrots) and fines (stick) illustrates that although workers were nominally self-employed, the platforms hold considerable power to dictate their behavior.

Paying to Work

Online gig English teachers are forced to invest a significant amount of their own resources into procuring necessary technology tools for teaching online. For example, teachers are expected to provide their own computer, broadband Internet, and mic/headset. Some teachers even buy their own generators to avoid the brownouts that occur with regularity in the Philippines (Velasco, 2020). While some of these costs may seem trivial to individuals in high-income countries, they posed a significant challenge to the teachers, given their socioeconomic status. Out of the eleven participants, the majority (six) were earning between $436 and $872 dollars-per-month, which places them into the "lower middle income" category according to the Philippines government (Albert et al., 2020).

Obtaining a stable Internet connection to run video call can be difficult for the teachers, and the struggle is exacerbated by the fact that the cost of Internet in the Philippines is comparatively higher than many countries with higher incomes (Soriano, 2019). Since some of the teachers did not have broadband Internet access before teaching, they were forced to buy it, even without the guarantee of actually landing a job. For example, Ana said:

> It was just a risk for me because you know, I only have 500 pesos ($10) left that time and I already have the equipment and I was just staring for them for one week and I was like, I think I can do it now—I can apply for PLDT [Internet service provider].

Ana eventually purchased a monthly plan that cost $35 per month; a considerable sum for someone whose English teaching position pays only $2.30 per hour. Ana related that she had tried to purchase a slightly cheaper and faster service, but that it was unavailable in the small town in which she lives. Teachers' investments come with no guarantee of employment, as highlighted by Ana's earlier mention of the head-set she purchased from someone who had failed their interview for an online English tutoring job. Filipino teachers who lack the money to make

these substantial investments are at a serious disadvantage compared with teachers from high-income countries, who have access to cheaper, more reliable broadband and for whom purchasing computers and headsets is less financially burdensome. Of the 11 teachers, 7 said they had invested more than $400 to teach online.

In addition to investments in hardware and credentials, online English teachers are also forced to expend their own money to adhere to local tax regulations, since they are not technically employees, but are instead considered independent contractors. When the first author started their online English teaching job, she had incurred a variety of fees, including: authorized receipts, financial ledgers, tax documents, certification of registration, and opening a bank account at a specific bank. In total, this cost more than $80, or the equivalent of 32 hours-worth of lessons on some platforms.

Depending on the platform, teachers are also expected to furnish professional attire to meet the dress code of the company (women are also instructed to wear make-up). Finally, teachers are forced to invest their time—in a long and laborious application process that will ultimately deny most of them employment. Illustrative of the significant time commitment, the first author attended one company's group interview that lasted eight hours. Platforms are able to rely on a steady stream of applicants due in part to the difficulty of the local labor market, as well as their aggressive advertising; the majority of the teachers interviewed were initially recruited to online English teaching through Facebook advertisements, many of which are misleading in the amount of money they imply teachers can earn.

Discounted Nativeness

Discrimination

All eleven teachers were acutely aware of Filipinos' precarious position within the global hierarchy of online English teaching. That is, they were aware that they occupied a tenuous position in the English teaching industry vis-à-vis "native" speakers from countries like the United States and Great Britain. Several of the teachers expressed consternation over the fact that some platforms explicitly pay Filipino teachers less, a practice that persists ostensibly because: 1) they are not "native" speakers; or 2) the Philippines has a lower cost of living than many other countries.

The teachers often connected the low wages Filipino commanded in the industry to issues of racial discrimination. Summarizing these frustrations, Maggie, a single woman living in China, explained:

> There are hierarchies that exist, the top tier belongs to the native speaker and you're white, next is a native speaker but you're not white, next is you're white but not a native speaker. Then it continues to go down, we belong to the very bottom—bottom dwellers, to be frank.

As Maggie's quote indicates, teachers are well aware of the intersectional nature of privilege in the English teaching industry, where race, nationality, and gender operate in tandem to establish the legitimacy of various teachers (Curran, 2020). The result of this matrix is that Filipino teachers are relegated to the status of "bottom dwellers." Later, Maggie added:

> I met some Filipino teachers that have a little bit of advantage because they don't look like a Filipino, they look Caucasian or Spanish, *mestiza* [mixed].

The dimension of race was mentioned by other teachers as well. For example, Jenny related that students' parents would compliment her appearance, but refer to darker skinned teachers as ugly. Nicole bluntly summarized the situation that Filipino teachers face.

"I'll be honest with this system, I'm not really generalizing here. Most parents, or yeah, *especially* parents, what they always want…[is] someone who's white.

Accent also plays a crucial role in contouring the discrimination that teachers experience. The first author was rejected at the last stage of a job interview explicitly because she did not sound sufficiently "American." However, accent also matters in the hierarchy of explicitly "Filipino sounding" teachers. One participant, Lea, recounted how a platform's Filipino managers criticized her "regional" English accent, a fact she attributed to her rural upbringing:

I'm from the province, so I don't really sound like—I don't really sound like people from Manila when they speak English...people in Manila sounds more neutral than those from the province. But I think over time, I've developed that neutral accent as well."

Between them, the teachers had experience working on over a dozen platforms. As a result, they had experience instructing students from around the globe, many from countries with stronger economies and a higher GDP-per-capita than the Philippines[2]. The teachers related experiences of being "discounted" by students due negative perceptions of the Philippines' economic development. For example, Ana recalled one teacher who told her that she was "too pretty for a third world country." Anna continued:

I was like—I was like, "Sir, I'm sorry. Can you repeat that? Could you repeat that, please?" And he said, "I said that you're from a third world country and your country, Philippines, are trying to steal our borders." And I was like, "Okay, sir." Like, the whole 25 minutes, I need to endure my—I need to resist myself from like saying bad words to this student […] he said "I thought Filipinos are just born to be a domestic helper. Look at you, teaching. Aren't you so proud of yourself." He said that instead of working as a

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[2] Combined, our participants taught students from more than 20 countries. Of these countries, China and Korea were the most common source of students.

teacher, he said that it is more suitable for me to work in Hong Kong to like, clean the

windows.

While Ana's quote above feature a particularly egregious example of discrimination, Ana was far

from alone in experiencing this type of abuse. Often, this abuse involved casually disrespecting

the teacher as a result of their dual status as both a non-native speaker and a citizen of a less

geopolitically and economically powerful country. Angelica explained:

I used to have this a lot with Korean students, because oh, you know, second world

country, third world country, why am I learning? You know, I paid top dollar […] so why

I'm hearing that my teacher is from the Philippines?

Lea related a similar experience with some her own students, explaining that she felt they

doubted Filipino teachers language abilities in part because of the Philippines' comparative lack

of economic development:

We are not a developed country, maybe that's a reason why [they look down on us] …

because there are many poor people here and that's what they mostly see and they get

to build that prejudice that we are not native speakers

As the quotes above indicate, the discrimination the teachers face is linked to stereotypes about

the Philippines' and low level of economic development in comparison to students' countries.

Self-Discounting

Despite the racism experienced by many teachers, some participants viewed Filipino

teachers' experiences, including their low wages and maltreatment by platforms, as reflecting

Filipino teachers' objectively lower quality as English instructor. While superficially shocking,

such arguments reflects the neoliberal ethos of the gig economy more broadly. As Wahome &

Graham (2020) cogently demonstrate, imaginaries of digital entrepreneurship are built on

assumptions of neutrality, universality, and a level playing field. In this vein, Angelica related

her faith in digital entrepreneurship and its mantra of both meritocracy and self-reliance, saying:

> I would love to help them [Filipino teachers], I would love to just adopt them. And then
> like, just put them in the company that I went through. You know, but the thing is, when
> I listen to their recordings and how they're talking, it's—it's also like, yeah, no, it's really
> difficult. So, I want to help you, *but you have to help yourself too*.

In the quote above, Filipinos' inability to find work teaching English online is attributed to "how

they're talking" (e.g., a "bad" accent), and blame is correspondingly shifted onto individual

teachers' inability to "help themselves." The italicized text reframes Filipinos' difficulty

competing in the global marketplace for English into a matter of personal responsibility, rather

than globally circulating language ideologies and racism. Angelica later doubled-down on her

assertion that, with enough gumption, Filipinos could compete with "native" speakers:

> [Accent] shouldn't be a problem. There's always my point. If there is a will,
> there's a way. So, if you want it, then you will get it, you know? And yeah, you just have
> to put a lot of—how to say—not pressure, you just have to put a lot of dedication into it.

In this quote the broad structural forces that deny Filipinos' recognition as legitimate English

speakers are occluded through a discourse of self-entrepreneurship that positions Filipino-

accented English as inherently less legitimate than that of native speakers.

Nicole also echoed the myth of meritocracy through her framing of the online English

teaching industry as color-blind:

> Once, one teacher I actually encountered, and he's Chinese born and raised in China, but
> he can speak English. He just recently practicing English, but he actually earned like,
> around $100 per hour or more, because he knows how to teach well, *not because of his*

   skin color.

In the quote above, Nicole uses the example of one non-native teacher who is earning a high salary to imply that all Filipino teachers can, with enough merit, out-earn native speakers. Of course, this assessment relies on using a single (and extremely rare) case to rhetorically erase the structural dynamics that prevent Filipino teachers from being able to earn higher wages. Specifically, the argument occludes the fact that: 1) Filipino teachers are structurally disadvantaged in the online English teaching industry (see Curran, 2020); and 2) the lack of alternative forms of income—coupled with an excess number of would-be teachers—make it difficult for Filipinos to negotiate higher salaries.

   While it may be possible to find some teachers like the Chinese instructor mentioned by Nicole—not-native, non-white teachers who command significant salaries— they are exceptionally rare.[3] In sum, the universal scope (and meritocratic façade) of the global gig economy obscures how language ideologies, Internet infrastructure and technology, and many platforms' discriminatory policies intersect to contour the market for language teaching in ways that place Filipino online English teachers at the bottom of an already precarious profession. Thus, while Anglo teachers also face precarity, the Filipino English teachers interviewed are rendered particularly precarious as a result of their linguistic, racial, gender, and geographic contexts.

Passing as a Native English Speaker

   The experience of discounted nativeness emerged most clearly from participants' accounts when they related having been instructed to lie to students by their employers. Multiple teachers related that the platforms they worked for marketed them to students as non-Filipino

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[3] In fact, despite our considerable experience, neither of the authors' have encountered a similar case.

native English speakers and instructed them to lie about their nationality. Crucially, not just one, but several platforms were mentioned as having engaged in this practice. Platforms' motivations for engaging in this practice are obvious: they can hire Filipino English teachers for a lower rate than that typically demanded by instructors from the United States, Canada, and other countries with that have both higher costs of living and whose teachers are native speakers. The platforms can then take advantage of Filipinos' American-style pronunciation and familiarity with American culture to trick students into believing that they are taking lessons with teachers from these countries. Ana explained:

> I had before, an experience in another platform, where we were advertised as American
>
> teachers… When the student asks you, you need to tell them you're from New York.

Ana explained that, when prompted, she would tell students that her father is Filipino and her mother was American, but that she was an American citizen. Ana explained that she felt extremely uncomfortable with the situation, and eventually quit: "I felt like the P90 ($1.80) per hour is not worth losing my nationality."

Ana's lies to students also sowed discord with her parents, who could overhear her giving lessons:

> I felt really bad because, you know, whenever I say I'm American, my parents are like,
>
> very confused. [They were] like, "I raised you—I raised you eating *bagoong* [fermented
>
> fish paste] and rice."

Ironically, Ana related that the company would lie not only to students, but also lied to their teachers about the identity of its managers:

> Another training, they said it's American, but I can tell that it's not American, like the
>
> Chinese guy is trying his best to sound American. But you know, when you work for a

call center for a minute—for many years, you can really tell he's not American. Yeah, he's [just] trying his best."

Another teacher, Lea, explained that when she worked for Triple8English[4], the company would purposefully seek out Filipino teachers that they could pass off as American:

One [teacher] is half so yeah, she looked like an American. The other one is a big girl, well, she looks like, like a Black or a Hispanic, born and raised in America…[so] students think they are talking to Americans.

Julia nonchalantly related a similar experience:

Oh, by the way, in some other schools, like Korean schools, the manager would ask you to pretend to be an American citizen.

Angelica explained how one audio-based company had assigned her a photo of a white women and the name "Angelica Smith." She explained:

Then if [the students] search "Angelica Smith" there will be thousands—it's like it's the 'Smith English Academy' because we're all like Smith, Johnson—common names.

Even when students are aware that their teachers are not native speakers, many students still expect them to provide a native-like experience. For example, Ana related:

For my students in Korea, I actually become more patient, like I adjust my patience and also *they like me to speak in a more native accent.* So whenever I'm talking to someone from Korea. *I adjust my accent to a more native one.*

In a similar example of students' demand for "native" instruction from Filipino teachers, the first author had a student repeatedly telling her to pronounce a certain word so that the student could hear how a "native speaker" would say the word.

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[4] A pseudonym

Platforms seek to capitalize on their Filipino teachers' proximity to nativeness, while also denying them the salaries that native teachers command. Companies' attempts to discursively link Filipino teachers with ideologically-grounded notions of nativeness is encapsulated in the advertisement shown in Figure 1, in which a company specifically advertises that it is looking for "English native speakers or mixed tutor who has western appearance." While the advertisement is somewhat unique in that it unabashedly calls for White-passing applicants, it corroborates participants' accounts of an industry that privileges hiring those Filipino teachers who can be passed off to students as White Westerners, and also corroborates findings on the centrality of Whiteness in the market for English teachers more broadly (e.g., Ruecker & Ives, 2015).

[Figure 1 Approximately here]

As demonstrated from the data above, platforms employ Filipino teachers precisely because their English is able to be marketed as "native." In this sense, platforms could be understood as participating in a sort of arbitrage. They buy Filipino teachers' English at a low price and then sell it to learners at a higher price. Crucially, as the quotes above reveal, platforms are able to accomplish this arbitrage in part by taking advantage of Filipino teachers' excellent English as well as the teachers' ability to, in the case of audio-only classes, pass as native speakers.

Discussion

Filipinos' unfixed and shifting position within broader definitions of nativeness is undeniably distant from the idealized White American native speaker. However, as a result of the Philippines' colonial experience and the prevalence of American influence in the Philippines, Filipinos—or rather, the platforms that employ them—can under certain circumstances take advantage of a proximity to nativeness that would be likely unavailable to teachers with less

familiarity with American accents and culture, such as Indians or Indonesians. Crucially, whether or not Filipino teachers are accepted by their students as native speaking teachers is affected by their appearance (highlighted by both Maggie and Ana above) such that some teachers, under certain circumstances, can be accepted by students as native speakers of English.

It is important to note that some teachers themselves (e.g., Angelica) see Filipino teachers' English instruction unfavorably in comparison with that of so-called native speakers. However, other teachers pushed back against a narrative of deficiency and asserted their identities as legitimate English teachers. They referenced Filipino teachers' "patience" and hospitability," and compared their pedagogy positively to that of native speaking teachers. At one point, Maggie juxtaposed hard working Filipinos teachers with native speakers who "come to work drunk, or they're high or something." In other words, while teachers related many students viewing their Filipino teachers as less qualified than White native speakers, (some) teachers reject this discursive positioning and assert their legitimacy as both English speakers and English instructors.

Conclusion

This study has provided empirical findings about the experiences of online Filipino English teachers. While studies have previously highlighted the precarity faced by English teachers (e.g., Barakos, 2019; Codó, 2018), no studies (of which the authors are aware) have explicitly focused on the precarity experienced by online English teachers. Considering the rapid growth of online language teaching over the last decade, more research on the topic is needed. For example, future studies should examine the experiences of online English teachers from other national, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Such research can establish the applicability

of discounted nativeness to other contexts, such as India and Kenya—countries which also experienced colonization by English-speaking countries.

In addition, scholarship is needed that examines the role that platforms play in either challenging or reinforcing native speakerism. As of now, the effect of these platforms on students' language ideologies is unknown. For example, while it is true that online teachers risk being sexualized (see Tajima, 2018) and verbally abused on online platforms, sustained interaction between students and their non-White/non-native teachers has the potential to combat pernicious language ideologies by exposing students to teachers that diverge from the globally circulating white-Anglo ideal (Jenks, 2019). As a result, these interactions might contribute to destabilizing stereotypes around what an English teacher *should* look or sound like. Unless these stereotypes are destabilized, an inequitable hierarchy will continue to underpin what is now a truly global market for English teaching.

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