

## Becoming IELTS Examiners: Demystifying Native-Speakerism in the Area of English Language Testing

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**ABSTRACT:** The field of English language teaching (ELT) has long been a fertile soil for native-speakerism where the native English teachers (NESTs) enjoy the privilege to be crowned as the ideal teachers of the language. Such belief is ingrained in all aspects of ELT including English language testing such as in International English Language Testing System (IELTS), where the presence of non-native English examiners is extremely rare. Departing from this phenomenon, this study, conducted as a narrative case study, embarked to counter such claim by looking into the professional credentials and experiences of three non-native English teachers (NNESTs) who, against all odds, become official IELTS examiners in Indonesia. The data of the study were gathered through interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that the participants develop native-like level of fluency as the result of their investment in developing English skills through engaging in English mediated communication, interactions and learning in private English language institutions (PELIs). Moreover, their success is also attributed to their international teaching certificates which opened doors for them to compete with NESTs. Thus, this study seeks to inspire NNESTs to continuously develop their teaching credentials and to boost their confidence as legitimate teachers of English.

**Keywords:** IELTS, native English teachers, native-speakerism

**ABSTRAK:** Bidang pengajaran bahasa Inggris telah lama menjadi lahan subur bagi ideology native-speakerism dimana penutur asli Bahasa Inggris menikmati hak istimewa sebagai guru bahasa Inggris yang ideal. Keyakinan tersebut telah mendarah daging dalam semua aspek ELT termasuk tes bahasa Inggris seperti di International English Language Testing System (IELTS), di mana kehadiran penguji bahasa Inggris yang bukan penutur asli Bahasa Inggris masih sangat jarang ditemui. Berangkat dari fenomena tersebut, penelitian ini, dilakukan sebagai studi kasus naratif, bermaksud untuk mempertanyakan klaim tersebut dengan melihat kredensial profesional dan pengalaman tiga guru bahasa Inggris bukan penutur asli yang, dengan segala perjuangannya dalam melawan segala rintangan, untuk menjadi penguji IELTS resmi di Indonesia. Data penelitian dikumpulkan melalui wawancara dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa para peserta penelitian mengembangkan tingkat kefasihan seperti penutur asli sebagai hasil dari investasi mereka dalam mengembangkan keterampilan bahasa Inggris melalui penggunaan Bahasa Inggris dalam komunikasi, interaksi social dan pembelajaran di lembaga bahasa Inggris. Selain itu, keberhasilan mereka juga tidak terlepas dari sertifikat pengajaran internasional yang mereka dapatkan yang telah memberikan kesempatan bagi mereka untuk bersaing dengan NEST. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menginspirasi NNEST untuk terus mengembangkan kredensial mengajar mereka dan meningkatkan kepercayaan diri mereka sebagai guru bahasa Inggris yang sah.

**Kata Kunci:** Penutur asli Bahasa Inggris, IELTS, ideology native-speakerism

### INTRODUCTION

The field of English language teaching (ELT) in Indonesia is filled with complex issues which represent the various political, economy, social, and cultural

aspect of learning English as a foreign language. In Indonesia, the teaching of English is often viewed with a pragmatic lens where English is mainly treated as a very powerful tool of communication. The main goal of learning English is to equip students with English skills which will enable them to communicate in the more globalized world (Niño Murcia, 2003). Moreover, how to 'best' teach English continues to be an interesting conquest to travel amid the fact that we are living in the post-method era. One of the issues which keeps coming up is whether NESTs are 'still' the best teachers of English. This issue is commonly known as native-speakerism. Native-speakerism is an ideology that roots in the believe that the ideal teacher of a language must be those who learn the language as their mother tongue thus have automatically acquired the language's culture (Holliday, 2006). Having learnt the language from using it with the community of the speaker, native speakers are expected to have a perfect command of the language.

The aim of this study is to investigate factors contributing to the success of three NNESTs navigating their journey to equal their NESTs counterparts as IELTS examiners. By presenting these NNESTs, it is hoped that it contributes to end the racial discrimination in the field of ELT. This study is guided by these research questions: How did the participant pave their way to become IELTS examiners? What were the challenges they faced in becoming IELTS examiners? How have their status as IELTS examiner changed their identity as NNESTs?

### **Learning English in Indonesia**

English is taught as a mandatory subject in all secondary schools in Indonesia (Dardjowidjojo, 2000; Lauder, 2008; Smith, 1991). It was also a widely taught at primary schools as a local content subject in primary schools, although it was terminated following the implementation of the 2013 National curriculum (Surat Keputusan Menteri Pendidikan Dan Kebudayaan [Ministry of Education Regulation], 1993). There are two main reasons behind the removal of EFL from the national primary school curriculum; EFL lessons were seen to be burdensome to the students and there was a need to focus on Indonesian and mother tongue language acquisition (Kasim, 2012). However, these rationales were in opposition to Bialystok's (2018) study on the effects of learning a second language to a student's first language acquisition. He argued that there is greater evidence on the benefits of learning a second language than the potential harms it may cause. Cook (2003) further explained that a second language (L2) can only inflict harm on first or native language (L1) competence when that L2 is used more than the L1 for a significant period of time. An example would be the case of immigrants in the US. This is clearly not the case for EFL in Indonesia since English is only a foreign language and, at least for students, its use is limited to school classrooms. In conclusion, the policy change which shifted EFL to only the secondary level means that students will work extra hard to learn English without any 'soft' introduction in primary school. To make the problem worse, English as a subject at secondary schools is allocated only 90 minutes per week, which is hardly sufficient time to develop students' competence in English (Hapsari, 2012). This situation forces parents and students to find alternatives for English education for their children such as through attending private schools which offer EMI (English for the Medium

of Instruction) programmes or studying at private English language institutions (PELIs).

EMI as a strategy to accelerate the acquisition of English as a foreign or second language has become a global phenomenon (Dearden, 2016). In becoming an immersion school, the students are exposed to and use English as the main language of instruction. Maximizing the exposure to English at school is believed to be effective in significantly improving students' English proficiency. As a result, there is a growing number of schools offering EMI programmes; there has also been the establishment of schools using the IB (International Baccalaureate) or Cambridge curriculum in some major cities in Indonesia. Unfortunately, EMI schools often charge high school fees which can only be afforded by students from privileged economic backgrounds. In Indonesia, the school fee for a school which offers EMI programmes ranges from 7 million to more than 10 million IDR per month (Arbar, 2020). This is considered very expensive for most Indonesian parents. For those who cannot afford to go to an EMI school, PELIs have become a popular option because, based on my observation, the fees to get into a PELI could be as low as 100 thousand IDR per month which is significantly lower than the school fee of an IB school. Still only those who come from middle and higher economic status can attend lessons at a PELI. As the economy of Indonesia in general is increasing and more people are able to pay for their children to attend PELIs (Lie, 2007), the popularity and demand for PELIs is obvious in that they are found in every city in the country, with more than 4,336 PELIs in Indonesia (Skjaerlund & Loop, 2015). The growing number of PELIs in Indonesia means that there is also a growing need for English teachers as staff members. Some of well-known PELIs are *English First (EF)*, *The British Institute (TBI)*, *LIA*, *International Language Programs (ILP)*, *British Council*, and *Wallstreet English*. Furthermore, with PELIs being a 'non-school' institution, they welcome teachers from all kinds of educational backgrounds and nationalities. The openness of PELI although on the one hand bring a 'fresh air' to the practice of ELT, it also creates conflicts between NNESTs and NESTs.

Finally, the advancement of technology and the widespread of the internet provide authentic materials and media to learn English.

### **Native Speakerism**

Native speakerism is an ideology prominent within ELT which is characterized by the belief that 'native speaker' teachers are ideal teachers of English language and are equipped with superior English language teaching methodology (Holliday, 2006). This ideology is rooted in monolingualism, where the notion of native speaker becomes the ultimate norm of being appropriate speakers and hearer of a language (Kachru, 1996). In this perspective, any differences from what is considered as the 'native canon' of a language is considered defective (often also refers to inference), and thus non-native speakers should try to minimize the errors they make when using English with the ultimate goal of having a native-like English. This ideology has impacted the ways people perceive and teach English such as in the way we define what a good English language teachers look like, the best ELT methodologies to apply in class, the most

appropriate teaching materials to be used, the most supportive classroom management strategies to employ, and the standard English to be learned (Doan, 2016; Floris, 2013; Holliday, 2006; Panggabean, 2015). Although native-speakerism has been challenged due to the global changes in the English users in the world, that the borders between native and non-native speakers are blurred and the fact that people around the globe grow up with English being their first language making it difficult to pin point the real owner of English language thus granted the title 'native speakers', it is still a prevailing ideology in ELT (Chaka, 2021).

In addition, the preference towards having NESTs does not only come from students, it also comes from the community of NNSETs themselves as it is revealed in the study of ten tertiary educational teachers from three countries: Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam (Doan, 2016). One of the reasons behind this preference is the belief that NSETs can present the most widely accepted versions of English. The participants think that learning English from a NSET will equip the students to 'survive' in their communication with other English speakers since the NSETs' English possess the quality of an international English intelligibility by which people coming from non-English background will be able to share the similar kinds of English. Furthermore, the accented English of NNSETs is believed to risk the full development of students' English ability.

The extent of which discrimination over non-native English teachers does not only occur within outer circle as it was shown in Doan's study above. Within inner circles countries, Clark and Paran (2007) reported that most of their respondents consisting of 90 recruitment officers of EFL teachers in the UK admitted that they see that being native speaker is significant to the job. The main reason is to do with their perception that native speaker teachers are model speakers and ideal teachers to teach English as it is shown in the listening materials where most common the context is conversation between two native speakers. This resulted the participants prioritizing native speaker teachers to be recruited for their institutions. All of these discourses could affect the ways non-native teachers view themselves. As a non-native speaker, these dominant discourses make me feel disempowered, undervalued, and incapable of delivering English lessons as good as native speaker teachers. It also weakened my motivation to contribute to the discussions around English teaching methodologies because the popular teaching methods are also 'invented' by native speaker experts. The discourses make me want to adopt the way NESTs teach and talk so that my value as a NNSET will increase. In a way, I almost see that NNSETs will never be appreciated as much as NESTs. One area in which NESTs are definitely advantaged is in the area of standardized test such as Toefl and IELTS. To become an IELTS examiner, someone must have IELTS band score 9 in the speaking module and at least 8 in the reading (Britishcouncilfoundation.id, n.d.). The argument is that an examiner must be able to assess candidates' levels of proficiency ranging from band score 0 to 9. Logically, only those who has reached band score 9 can assess the candidate's speaking test. The requirement of such high (perfect) scores in

IELTS are almost unattainable for NNESTs, only a very few NNESTs can achieve those scores.

### **CELTA: an international English teacher's professional development programme**

Certificate of English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA), as an initial teacher training certificate, has gained its status as an internationally recognised certification (Barnawi, 2016) which can open doors for its holders to work as English teachers internationally (Dave ESL, 2020), but requires significant financial investment (Anderson, 2020). To date (October 2020) the fee to take CELTA was £1,495 + £156 (International House London, 2020), which could be considered as very expensive for Indonesian teachers because the cost of CELTA is equivalent to more than 5 to 7 times the minimum wages in Indonesia. Moreover, there are only two places in Indonesia that offer CELTA, one in Jakarta and the other one is in Bali (TESOL Indonesia, 2020). This professional qualification and others like it are designed to equip English teachers with the practical knowledge needed for the job, making it an appealing option to those without a teaching degree as well as those who have a teaching degree. A study in Iran involving six private English language schools, Ganji, Ketabi, and Shahnazari (2018) commented on CELTA's effectiveness in equipping teacher trainees with knowledge about teaching and learning; the training programme enabled them to put that knowledge into practice. Moreover, the CELTA course offers constructive feedback during the course to help the participants make their lessons more effective. Anderson (2020) also noted that CELTA, as an intensive teacher training programme, had the potential to change teachers' beliefs and boost their confidence as internationally certified teachers. In his study with 28 Egyptian English teachers, Anderson pointed out that, after the CELTA training, the participants were committed to implement the communicative language teaching strategies, such as reducing teacher talking time and increasing student talking time, using pair work and group work and creating student centred lessons.

On the other hand, Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults (DELTA) is the programme which continues on from CELTA and it is very popular amongst those who are in senior teacher positions or working as academic coordinators. Whilst most of the content in CELTA emphasizes practical aspect of teaching English (Thornbury & Watkins, 2008) such as teaching methods, material development and simple linguistic analysis, DELTA's modules are much more academic and theoretical; a large portion of the programme is still dedicated to practical teaching elements. These qualifications are specifically discussed here because of their significant roles in the life of the majority of the participants in this study. The most common comment made by those who had taken a CELTA course was how the course had changed them as a teacher, which is similar to the findings of Thornbury and Watkins (2008).

These certifications do not require a university degree prior for enrolment (International House Bangkok, 2020) which make them attractive to both novice and more experienced teachers. Moreover, the popularity of the course and the prestige it gives its graduates also attracts those with an existing university teaching degree. The main requirement for attending CELTA is related to English

language proficiency, with a required IELTS score band of 7 to be eligible to attend the course. CELTA is an intensive and expensive course (more than £1,500): it lasts for just one month and the possibility of failing the course making it daunting for some teachers. CELTA is particularly highly valued in very few language institutions in Indonesia. In these PELIs, the 'CELTA way of teaching' has become the norm and must be followed by the teachers if they want to be seen as effective teachers. Moreover, at Dago and Riau, having a CELTA certificate is required if one wants to develop their career at either institution. The superiority of CELTA over local qualification such as a degree in English teaching is a form of 'domestication' of native speaker centred teaching values, approaches and methods (Morgan, 2016).

### **International English Language Testing System (IELTS)**

IELTS as an English language test shares domination in the English assessment field with Test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL). There are two types of IELTS; IELTS academic and general training. Academic IELTS is widely used as a required test for those who want to study at universities in the UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and USA, whereas the general training is recommended for immigration and work (IELTS.org, 2021). Moreover, IELTS consists of four sections, namely listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Overall test may take up to 2 hours and 45 minutes.

In addition, the requirements to become an IELTS examiner are arduous such as: 1) be native speakers of English or a non-native speaker with an IELTS band score of 9 in the Speaking and Writing components; 2) hold tertiary qualifications or equivalent; 3) hold relevant qualifications in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages or equivalent; 4) have substantial relevant teaching experience (IELTS.org, 2021). From the list of criteria above we can see that although it opens door for NESTs to be an IELTS examiner, the requirement of having a native-like English means that very few NESTs are eligible for the position.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research project was conducted as a case study of three NNESTs from a reputable PELI in Bandung. Merriam (1988) differentiates case studies based on their end product. Coming from a qualitative research background, Merriam classified case study research as being descriptive, interpretive, or evaluative. A descriptive case study seeks to present a "detailed account of the phenomenon under study" (p.27). Descriptive case studies, also known as exploratory case studies, are particularly useful in investigating relatively new topics (people, events or programmes) which have not been researched yet. The output of descriptive studies can be useful for future research seeking to compare between different cases or to generate a theory. Interpretive case studies, also known as analytical case studies, aim not only to describe a phenomenon, like in descriptive case studies, but also to understand relational values amongst its variables and even to construct a theory. The data gathered will be categorized to "illustrate, support or challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to the data gathering." (p.28). "Evaluative case studies involve description, explanation, and judgement." (p.28) There are three main benefits of conducting an evaluative case study. First,

it can explain the cause and effect relations of an interventional treatment which otherwise would be too complex and intricate to be done by survey or experimental methods. Secondly, it is very useful in describing real-life contexts of the study or intervention. Thirdly, it can be useful in evaluating the practice of the intervention in the future. Finally, it can be used to explore the situation in which the outcome of the intervention is not clear or has multiple possibilities. This study is a descriptive case study that it tries to understand how the participants navigate their professional trajectories within a discriminative field of ELT in Indonesia. This study seeks to understand the types of investment the participants made to develop relevant skills and knowledge to compete with NESTs in becoming an IELTS examiner, the challenges faced by the participants as NNESTs in the field which is dominated by NESTs, and how their status as IELTS examiner influence their teaching practice and identity as NNESTs in Indonesia.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

In line with the methodology of the study, the data for this study were collected through semi structured interviews. Semi-structured interview is suitable for this study because on the one hand it gives some space for the participants to response according to their perceptions but on the other hand it structures the interview to focus on relevant topics for the study. Moreover, semi-structured interviewing is suitable for this study because of its conversational nature (Ary et al., 2014). Guided by a set of pre-planned questions and prompts for discussion, the interviews provided the flexibility to adopt them as the interview proceeds (Punch & Oancea, 2014).

### **The Participants**

The participants of this study are three NNESTs teaching at a PELI in Indonesia. At the time of data collection stage, all participants had taught English for more than five years. The names used in this study; Granada, Aurelia, and Mary, were pseudo-names to ensure confidentiality. Granada developed her English by studying at a PELI and enjoying English movies, TV series, and music. She did her CELTA in 2010 and DELTA in 2018. She was a senior teacher at Riau for two years (2011-2013) before focusing on becoming a teacher trainer. She became an IELTS examiner in 2017. Granada started her teaching career in a small PELI and changing institutions for more than three times before settling at Riau. She believes that she needs to keep on learning and get professional qualifications to enhance her career in ELT. She often attends online seminars and workshops.

Aurelia also learned English at PELIs. She loves listening to English songs and watching English movies. Her father was a lecturer so being a teacher was not a surprise for her. She did her CELTA in 2010, DELTA in 2015, and completed her Master in Education in 2020. She has always been a part time teacher because she looks after her son on her won in Indonesia because her husband is working abroad.

Mary had an uncommon upbringing for an Indonesian child because she had the opportunity to live abroad for most of her childhood. She was only two years old when her father got a job at the Indonesian embassy in New Zealand. They

lived in New Zealand for three years and later on moved to Australia for four years. These experiences shape her English to be as fluent as a native speaker. Her dream was to work in an international organization but because of her household obligation as a housewife she decided to be an English teacher. She argued that becoming an English teacher at a PELI offers flexibility in terms of work hours that she can manage her time well between doing her duty as a teacher and a mother and wife for her family. She graduated from a respectable university majoring International Relation and joined a student exchange programme to Canada for six months. During the exchange programme she worked as a teacher assistant at a primary school. She said that her experience as a teacher assistant gave her the confidence to be a teacher later on. She has been teaching English for more than 12 years at two big PELIs in Indonesia. She did her CELTA in 2018 and became a senior teacher not long after that. She became an IELTS examiner in 2020 and has been travelling to various cities in Indonesia to conduct IELTS speaking test.

### **Data Analysis**

The data from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which include six stages, namely:

- Step 1 Transcribing: refers to the process of converting the spoken words into written format.
- Step 2 Coding: refers to the process of extracting the information in the transcription into chunks of words which represent a segment of speech.
- Step 3 Member checking: refers to the process of showing the initial interpretation process to the participants to ensure the accuracy of the interpretation.
- Step 4 Creating common themes: refers to the process of connecting the codes and see the relationship between the codes and assigning a theme.
- Step 5 Finalizing themes of the study: refers to the process of looking backwards to the themes and codes to ensure the consistency of the interpretation.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Results**

As mentioned above, the data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis approach. The results then be categorized into three themes according to the research questions guided this study. The first theme answers the first research question in which it presents the formative stages of the participants becoming an IELTS examiner. In line with the second research question, the second theme investigates some of the challenges faced by the participants in becoming IELTS examiners. Finally, the third theme answers the third research questions by looking into the participants' identity as NNESTs now that they become IELTS examiners.



The first theme is called the investment of becoming an IELTS examiner. This theme has three sub-themes, namely their investment to develop near-native English language ability, gaining international teacher certification, and focusing on teaching English exam preparation classes. The first theme has the biggest proportion in the study because it covers the longest periods of the participants' professional journey started from their English language learning stage, becoming an English teacher, and becoming an IELTS examiner.

All of the participants mentioned that they developed a near-native English by using English in their daily lives either through watching English movies and TV series, listening to English songs, reading English novels, or living abroad.

“Well since I was little, I like English a lot like I even added -s to every Indonesian word that I used. just to sound like English language. Like my mum sometimes she spoke in English at home. in addition, I usually watched English programmes on TV” (Granada, Interview)

“It's funny because when I was little I used to talk to my dolls and then I said to my mum that I wanted to study at a PELI, it was when I was still 6 or 7.” (Aurelia, Interview)

“I've never learned English formally. I grew up in NZ and Oz. and then came back to Indonesia when I was 9. I was born in Indonesia then went to NZ when I was 2. So I spent 6 years abroad” (Mary, interview)

Another strategy that the participants took is by taking English classes at private English language institutions (PELLs).

“And I didn't remember much about the lesson but I remember about the environment, about the teachers about my friends and how the approach was totally different from the one I had at school. And it was more relaxed the way teacher. or our teacher introduced English was you know like really fun with games and outing sometimes we went out for like ice cream with the teachers. And I think at that time I'm learning English as something fun.” (Aurelia, Interview)

From the scripts above it could be seen that the participants developed their English skills through their 'natural' interactions and social relationship. They used English in their communication so in a way they did not really learn English but rather acquired it (Krashen, 1981). Another qualification that the participants must have is an international certificate such as CELTA and DELTA. Aurelia mentioned that she took DELTA to develop her teaching credentials but on the other hand it allowed them to apply to be an IELTS examiner.

In addition, the role of other teachers to encourage them to pursue their aspiration to become an IELTS examiner can not be understated. All of the participants claimed that they had the dream to become an IELTS examiner after talking to other teachers who happened to be IELTS examiner themselves. Granada, being the first NNEST to become an IELTS examiner inspired Mary and

Aurelia as mentioned by Aurelia, *“It was after I knew Grace that the idea occurred to me that maybe I can try to be an IELTS examiner too.”* (Interview). Both Mary and Aurelia claimed that they talked and learned from Granada how to be an IELTS examiner. Granada on the other hand was inspired by her NESTs colleague.

The second theme elaborates some of the challenges that they face in becoming an IELTS examiners are related to the scheduling in by which they have to perform their duty, the rigorous selection process, and negative comments from IELTS test takers.

All participants claimed that they had to work at weekends which often put them in a difficult position as a wife and a mother. Mary and Aurelia explicitly mentioned that,

“You must be willing to work over weekend because most of oh well all of the IELTS tests that I have done is at weekends. So ya arrange your schedule and your family time too.” (Mary, Interview)

“Hmmm.. definitely the work days. I mean it’s only two to three days a week but it’s at weekends so it is quite difficult to spend time with my family. I mean yes, I have time with them from Monday or Tuesday till Thursday but you know my husband is also working so the only time he has to spend together as a family is weekend. And it is my work days. So it can be difficult sometimes especially during school break.”(Aurelia, Interview)

Another finding is that they often face discouraging comments by the test takers because, *“I have heard some comments like “why is the examiner Indonesian not native?” Is this a real IELTS test?” stuff like that which made me upset and sometimes mad.”* (Granada, Interview)

Finally, the third theme shows that the participants show certain identity as NNESTs which include claiming more prestigious status as IELTS examiner, gaining more financial gain, having more freedom in terms of work hours, and becoming more knowledgeable in terms of teaching English in general and English language testing in particular. All participants mentioned that they became more equipped as English teachers that they are more knowledgeable after becoming IELTS examiners. Granada said that,

“...because you know a lot more about the test as the examiner. I know how to prepare my students to help them answer the questions more effectively. I mean I know what the examiner is looking for.” (Granada, Interview)

Mary emphasized on the prestigious image of an IELTS examiner said that,

“I don’t feel that I am on a different league or something. Hahaha other people may see it that way hahahaha But you know it is easier to promote yourself especially if you teach privately when you say that you are an IELTS examiner it can increase your value.” (Mary, Interview)

In addition, Granada mentioned that she could not resist but to judge other teacher's English level now that she had more knowledge about the indicators used in IELTS speaking test. She said,

"I am now an IELTS examiner so I can't help but judging the new teachers' level of English and in my mind I score them hahahaha. I know that those with lower level of English proficiency could be asked to teach children classes so grammatically not so challenging but still the children will learn from them how to pronounce English words either consciously or subconsciously. so if the teachers give wrong examples then the students will develop inaccurate pronunciation. We might be desperate to recruit new teachers but once we recruit them then it is our responsibility to upgrade them so that they are up to our standard, in English and in teaching." (Granada, Interview)

## Discussion

### Paving ways to become IELTS examiners

The first research question traces the routes on which the participants walked their way into the position of IELTS examiners. The participants started their journey in becoming an IELTS examiner by developing near native English ability. In this study, the participants learnt English through two modes of learning, namely informally through their daily use of English and taking classes at PELIs.

Aurelia really enjoyed learning English that at an early age (5 or 6 years old) she asked her mother to take her to a PELI. In the end, going to a PELI was part of Aurelia and Granada's lifestyle as children from middle- and upper-class families, as similarly observed by Smith (Smith, 1991) that "*English has high status and many middle and upper-class Indonesians will use English for peer interaction*" (p.41)

Aurelia and Granada testified that their English lessons were fun, useful in helping them to understand English grammar, and allowed the development of speaking skills. Although none of the participants could recall the contents of the lessons that they attended, most of them remember the feelings they had when they were taking classes at the PELI. They all felt relaxed and comfortable learning English from their teachers, and that the way their teachers taught was fun, communicative emphasis the development of speaking skills and pronunciation. To this Aurelia said:

I didn't remember much about the lesson but I remember about the environment, about the teachers about my friends and how the approach was totally different from the one I had at school. And it was more relaxed the way teacher or our teacher introduced English was you know like really fun with games and outing sometimes we went out for like ice cream with the teachers. And I think at that time I'm learning English as something fun... (Aurelia)

From the script it could be implied that Aurelia enjoyed her time studying English at PELI. She reflected on her learning experience as a social event where she could meet her friends and teacher and had good times together. She noticed the contrast between her learning English at school and at PELI and that she considered learning English as something fun. Aurelia did not remember exactly how her teacher taught her materials, but she recalled the experience as something positive and enjoyable. She also mentioned that her teachers at PELI taught English in a communicative manner which is in line with the findings from Adi's (2011) study which claimed that PELI teachers employed CLT in their classes.

The second of investment that the participants made in learning English was through engaging in informal learning activities such as listening to English songs, watching English movies, reading novels, and practicing their English with other people. Although the participants did not have an explicit intention to develop their English through their engagement with these activities, given their status as forms of informal learning (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974), all participants claimed that it was through these activities that they improved their English ability.

Informal learning refers to learning through our involvement in day to day activities such as in our interactions in family, with neighbours and playmates, workplace, marketplace, books, and other media which do not follow any format with which does not have any sorts of structures like the ones found in formal learning (school) or nonformal learning (other education institutions) (Coffield & Economic and Social Research Council (great Britain), 2000; Coombs & Ahmed, 1974). The types of informal learning which were done by the participants in this study include writing their experiences in a diary, using English at home when talking to the other members of their family, speaking with native speakers, practicing by speaking to a mirror, living abroad, learning through doing hobbies, learning while teaching, learning through social media, helping a friend to check his student's tests, having a pen pal to practice writing, and having a friend to practice their speaking. Their engagement in these English activities was not always with the intention to improve their English but more often it was ignited by fact that they enjoyed using English in their communication or when doing their hobbies.

Mary's families moved abroad which made them immersed in English community. Their process of learning English was an integrated part of growing up. Mary was very young when she moved to Australia; she quickly acquired the language when she started socializing with her new communities, either in her school or with her neighbours. English became her main language to communicate, even at the expense of her Indonesian language skills because upon her return to Indonesia, she had to relearn the Indonesian language.

The participants see listening to English songs as a way to learn English. In fact, learning through songs has long been proven to have positive impact on learning a language (Millington, 2011). Another benefit of learning through songs is that learners are exposed to English language in a real-life context, thus allowing them to learn about how English is used in real life. The students are exposed to authentic materials which they might encounter in real life situations. Listening to songs could also help learners with their pronunciation as they can learn how to

say the words in the song lyric accurately such as where to stress, and noticing the weak and strong syllables (Ebong & Sabbadini, n.d.).

To conclude, the direct return on English learners' investment in learning English as a foreign language is the ability to communicate in English. In this study, the participants' English ability goes as far as gaining IELTS score 8.5 and 9.0 which indicates their near native English fluency level. With such level of English ability, the participants are eligible to compete against the NESTs who are dominating the role as IELTS examiners.

Another step that the participants took was developing their professional credential through gaining international certification. All of the participants in this study have CELTA and DELTA qualification. As mentioned in the Literature Review section above, these certifications are recognised by English institution worldwide and open doors for their holders to teach English at prestigious institutions globally.

In addition, the participants also developed certain area of expertise in English testing. All participants at the beginning of their teaching career started teaching general English and English for young learners. As they developed more experience, they began to teach exam preparation courses including IELTS classes. Prior to their attempt to become an IELTS examiner they intentionally asked their institution to assign them with more IELTS classes. They did this because they knew that they need a minimum of 2 years experiences in teaching IELTS to become an eligible candidate of IELTS examiner.

### **Challenges as non-native IELTS examiners**

The second research question deals with challenges that the participants face on their day to day carrying out their job as IELTS examiners in Indonesia. As mentioned in the result section, the two main challenges face by the participants are related to personal responsibility and professional legitimacy. In term of personal responsibility, the participants need to manage their time between the multiple roles such as a mother, a wife, an English teacher, and an IELTS examiner. All of the participants were female teachers in their 40s, married and have children. Their role as a mother and wife demand their availability to attend to their husband and children needs. Their identity as wife and mother is their priority in which determined their decision of whether to accept or refuse their assignment as IELTS examiners. When their assignments collide with their family agenda, they will decline the assignment. It does not mean that they are not serious or committed to their job as IELTS examiners, it merely not their primarily responsibility. Such dilemma is faced by female professionals in many places such as in Spain (Merma-Molina et al., 2022), Pakistan (Ali & Sohail, 2022), Hungary (Paksi et al., 2022) to name a few.

In their role as IELTS examiners, the participants face oppositions which mostly come from the test takers who questioned their credential and ability to be a legitimate IELTS examiner. This discriminatory behaviour stems from native-speakerism ideology. The test takers believe that native speakers are always better than non-native speakers especially in speaking skills (Atamturk et al., 2018; Murtiana, 2012; Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014; Watson Todd & Pojanapunya, 2009). The

participants do not confront the critics but chose to focus on delivering their job the best they can.

### **The effects of their status as an IELTS examiner on their identity as English teachers in Indonesia**

Being an IELTS examiner as a non-native speaker of English denotes certain qualities of the holder. As mentioned before, the field of English testing is profoundly dominated by native speaker. When a non-native teacher became an IELTS examiner, he or she claim a prestigious position within the community of NNESTs. The fact that they have a near-native level of fluency indicates their competence in the target language which can only be reach by very few people mostly if as the result of their living abroad (Foster, 2009). Mary told me that she had been an IELTS examiner since 2019. She told me that she really enjoyed her role as an examiner because she got to travel to some cities in Indonesia plus the salary was much higher than what she received as a teacher at her institution. She mentioned that she would still be teaching at the PELI because her examiner job was only on weekends. It could be said that becoming an IELTS examiner has enabled her to do more than just teaching and provides her the opportunity to broaden her horizon of thought through visiting various cities in Indonesia.

Like Mary, as an IELTS examiner, Granada was able to travel to some cities in Indonesia to conduct the IELTS speaking and writing tests. In Indonesia, she was one of the few examiners who was not a native speaker of English because the majority of IELTS examiners are NESTs. This position has given her a distinct status (institution and affinity-identity (Gee, 2001)) as a highly-qualified and very respected English teacher. Moreover, because she was not dependent on her institution in terms of earning her living, she became more critical about how the school is run. She said that her salary as an IELTS examiner was more than enough for her and it was more than three times what she got as a full-time teacher at her institution.

In terms of how they see they are as an IELTS examiner, they all mentioned that they became a 'better' teacher. They also some change in their teaching belief. Granada, for instance, at the beginning of her career as a teacher, she believed that a lesson must be fun, so she always incorporated games in her lesson. However, after becoming an IELTS examiner, she noticed that she was becoming less fun, but claimed that she was becoming a more effective teacher. She now believed that the instructional time that she had must be used to provide more focus and direct practice for her students. Her changes in the way she sees English teaching, from advocating CLT to more English for specific purposes (Exam preparation) which might be caused by her involvement as an IELTS examiner and trainer. She admitted that after being an IELTS examiner for five years, she now preferred teaching exam preparation programmes than teaching general English or conversation classes.

Finally, Granada could not escape the examiner mentality as she often judges other teacher's English proficiency level. Being an IELTS examiner Granada has become more knowledgeable regarding the indicators she can use to determine someone's English level. This skill enables her to assist the teacher

coordinator at her institution to determine the types of classes a teacher should have based on her or his level of English.

## CONCLUSION

The conclusion of the study is presented according to the research questions guiding the study. The first research question looks into the journey of the participants becoming IELTS examiners amid the fact that it is dominated by native-speakers. The participants paved their ways into becoming IELTS examiners by developing near native level of English, gaining international teacher certifications, and building their teaching portfolio especially in the area of teaching exam preparation courses such as in teaching IELTS and TOEFL. Firstly, the participants emphasized the role of developing English language skills through using it in their daily conversations.

Secondly, the participants invested their time or money to develop teaching skills and credentials. The main teacher professional training that the participants took part is CELTA. Moreover, the participants claimed that they became a different teacher upon the completion of the course. This is similar to Block and Gray's (2016) study of a CELTA training programme in the UK which could be seen as producing a certain kind of teachers, those who are able to deliver lessons using standardized textbooks such as *New Headways*, *InsideOut*, or *Cutting Edge* effectively. They noted that following this training, the participants subscribed to the CELTA ways of teaching, with a strong communicative focus.

In addition, the participants, being aware of the requirements needed to be an IELTS examiner took the initiative to ask for more exam preparation courses. The participants were aware that they need to have at least two years experiences in teaching IELTS before they were eligible to apply for the position.

Another finding worth pointing out is that the roles of their institution in inspiring them to become an IELTS examiner. All of the participants have some experiences working with IELTS examiners as their colleague. It is through their conversation and interactions the participants were encouraged to apply for the position of IELTS examiners. This finding signals the significant roles of experienced teachers to inspire others to further develop their teaching career through their informal conversation with each other (Holmgren & Sjöberg, 2022).

The second research question explores some of the challenges that the participants encounter in their job as IELTS examiner. There are two main challenges mentioned by the participants, namely managing their roles between being a wife and a mother and facing negative comments from test takers. The fact that IELTS tests have mainly be conducted over the weekends makes it difficult for the participants who are mothers and wives to spend time with their family. They often had to cancel their appointments especially during school holiday season to ensure that they were able to fulfil their duties at home. Secondly, the participants often heard comments which question their credibility and legitimacy as IETLS examiners due to the fact that they are not native speakers of English. These comments are rooted in native-speakerism in the field of ELT which sees only native speaker teachers are able to 'perfectly' assess English proficiency level

of the test takers. The participants did not confront the test takers but rather combat it by doing their job well.

Finally, the third research question investigates how their status as IELTS examiner influence their lives as NNESTs in Indonesia. The participants claimed that they became better teachers as the results of the increased knowledge in the area of teaching IELTS and the realm of English testing. They also benefited financially that they get paid as much as NESTs and they get to travel to different cities in the country. They did not feel however that they are on a different league compare to other NNESTs although they also claim of having higher value than non IELTS examiner teachers.

### Further studies

This study used the participants perspectives as the main source of information. Further studies should be conducted to also include the perspective of other NNESTs, NESTs, and their employers. These broad of participants will enhance the research findings and shed lights to the claim made the participants.

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