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Native and Non-native English Teachers in the Classroom: A re-examination

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Abstract

Native English speakers are often claimed to be better language teachers than non-native English speakers, both by those who have not reflected critically on the inherent differences between knowing how to use a language and knowing how to teach a language, and by those who assume that non-native English speakers are by definition not fluent. Nativeness is thus equated with pedagogical superiority. This claim, whether it is made by students, parents, hiring boards, or other interested parties, is detrimental to non-native English teachers as educators and to the students who learn from them. Non-native English speaking teachers may be demoralised or discriminated against in hiring practices. Students lose when they are taught by teachers with nativeness as their defining characteristic, rather than by the best teachers. In this article the native speakers model, itself a problematic concept, is analysed to show how supposed nativeness is difficult to define accurately. Then the benefits of being taught by native English speakers and non-native English speakers are outlined, with a view to promoting more just hiring practices and sounder educational results for students of English worldwide.

Keywords: native, non-native, ELT, teachers

Native and non-native English teachers

As the demand for English language teaching spreads throughout the world, what has been called the “mystique” (Ferguson, 1982, p. xiii) of the native speaker seems to have grown, despite opposition from researchers who have sought to champion non-native English speaking teachers. Jenkins (2012), for example, argues against the belief that only the English of native speakers is the proper variety. Native English speaking teachers often have privileged roles as classroom teachers, despite a lack of training or experience. Advertisements for private language schools, elementary schools and universities often mention a candidate’s nativeness, itself a problematic term, as a prime qualification. In Hong Kong, native English speakers (NESs) were introduced as part of the Expatriates English Teaching Scheme (EETS), which was rather unsuccessful. Boyle (1997, p. 174) argues that “the root of the problem was that the [Hong Kong] Education Department had not really tuned in to the local teachers’ resentment at the implication of the EETS that an expatriate native-speaker teacher of English was better than a local teacher.”

Historically, this privileged status for native English speakers has also had effects on both linguistic research and on English language teaching (ELT). The native English speaker is often taken as the control for research purposes (Kachru, 1994; Sridhar, 1994), the evaluator of what is or is not correct English usage for dictionaries (Paikeday, 1985), the ideal English language teacher (Honey, 1997; Medgyes, 1992) and the most qualified contributor to teaching and linguistic journals (Flowerdew, 2001).

If countries in the Arab world and elsewhere are to successfully develop their ELT programmes, it is necessary to be aware of the benefits and limitations of all teachers, and to avoid the common practice of preferring NES teachers to local teachers.

Criticism of the native speaker construct

Over time the volume of criticism of the idea that the native speaker is the ideal language teacher has been building. Some are critical of using the native speaker as the only standard for applied linguistics research (Kachru, 1994; Phillipson, 1992; Sridhar, 1994). Others are concerned with the often real, but sometimes unstated, tendency of educational administrators to show preferential treatment to native English speakers in ELT hiring (Braine, 1998; Christophersen, 1992; Cook, 2000; Forhan, 1992; Liu, 1998; Medgyes, 1992). It has been pointed out that some people’s speech may display features of both native and non-native English and cannot be called one or the other (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 2001). Individual native speakers may speak and write in markedly different ways from those in their communities who use standard English forms (Leung, Harris, & Rampton, 1997), which often means that for ELT purposes only certain NESs will be favoured, typically those who use the language variety of the most socially powerful groups.

Other people, like balanced bilinguals, may also not be easily named NES or non-native English speakers (NNEs) (Genesee, 1987). However, the fact that some people cannot be easily categorized does not necessarily invalidate the categories themselves. There may be certain people whose linguistic characters make it difficult to decide whether they are native speakers of

a language or not, but that does not mean that other people with less complex linguistic histories cannot be classified as native speakers.

Cook (1999, p. 187) summarises the popular perception of a native speaker as “a person is a native speaker of the language learnt first”, but some argue that the entire concept of the native speaker is a flawed construct (Paikeday, 1985), coining new terms such as “accomplished users” (Edge, 1988) of English or “expert” speakers (Rampton, 1990) of English to replace it. Pennycook (1994) has even turned the traditional terms around, claiming that in English as a foreign language contexts it is the local teachers who should be called native teachers while expatriates from America, Britain and other inner circle countries should be called non-natives because they are not indigenous to the locales where they are working.

Such terms and new definitions tend not to last, with the native and non-native dichotomy remaining current in both popular and professional use (Arva & Medgyes, 2000; Holliday, 2006), perhaps because of its convenience (Medgyes, 1999). There may be individuals with complex linguistic histories who are difficult to categorise firmly as either NESs or NNESs, like the people described by Boyle (1997), but there are also many people, monolingual English speakers for example, who can quite easily and clearly be called NESs. As Leung (2005) writes, there are clearly native speakers, even if we cannot pinpoint exactly how they use their language.

It has been pointed out that the NES / NNES dichotomy is often based on power relations (Liu, 1998; Phillipson, 1992) and that the dichotomy is a useful tool of discrimination (Braine, 1998) because certain powers were both created and maintained by the split between NNESs and NESs. NESs maintain their exclusive status (Widdowson, 1997) and English language teaching remains the domain of NES teachers (Braine, 1998; Forhan, 1992). This preference by some administrators and students for NES teachers over NNES teachers (Butler, 2007; Lee, 2000; Takada, 2000) as ideal ESL language teachers has been documented to the extent that it has been dubbed ‘native-speakerism’. (Although it is worth noting that a recent study by Ling & Braine (2007) in Hong Kong found that students did not seem to have a negative attitude towards NNES teachers, despite the fact the administrators and parents were said to.) Holliday (2006, p. 385) defines native-speakerism as “a pervasive ideology within ELT, characterized by the belief that ‘native-speaker’ teachers represent a ‘Western culture’ from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology”. NNES teachers are thus considered unsuitable for certain jobs (Forhan, 1992) or told outright that NNES teachers need not apply (Braine, 1998). (Although see Clapson & Hyatt (2007) for a discussion of how bureaucratic rules can also inhibit or prohibit NESs who wish to work outside their home countries as EFL teachers from ever achieving professional parity with local NNES teachers.) Those NNESs who do become ELT teachers, or even those NESs whom students perceive to be NNESs for some reason, may be questioned about their English competence by their students (Amin, 1988; Takada, 2000), because of the assumption that NNESs must be sub-standard ELT teachers. Students’ parents can also affect the status of NNES teachers in relation to NES teachers. Takada (2000) reports that parents of students at her Japanese middle school were active in campaigning to have the few NES teachers at the school handle more English teaching duties, which would simultaneously reduce the teaching duties of local Japanese teachers of English. This could cause the Japanese teachers to question the effectiveness and validity of their own teaching abilities, as Crooks (2001) argues that the presence of NES teachers often does. The NNES teachers may therefore feel that they have to do twice as well as NES teachers to be

seen as good teachers and to be accepted as equals by their colleagues (Thomas, 1999). Jenkins (2007) points out that ELT is an anomaly among school subjects, as it seems to be the only one where the preferences of students and their parents for a certain type of teacher is given such weight both by administrators and by researchers (cf. Timmis (2002) for an example).

The NNES teacher's race or ethnicity can also play a role in the discrimination he or she faces. Students have asked a Hong Kong teacher of English working in Canada if she was a volunteer (I. Lee, 2000), making the assumption that no one would pay a Chinese person to teach English. Respondents to Amin's (1999) interviews with English as a second language (ESL) teachers who immigrated to Canada as adults reported that students often felt only white people could be NESs and that only NESs could teach real Canadian English. Even English teaching professionals were sometimes shocked and embarrassed when Amin described herself as an NES, perhaps because she is a non-white person with a Pakistani accent. Non-Western teachers, whether they are NESs or NNESs, may be resented when jobs are scarce in Western universities, and thus passed over when they rightfully deserve employment (Braine, 1998). If people who are not white are sometimes thought of as not being capable of being native English speakers or credible English teachers (Lin et al., 2004; Thomas, 1999), then the reverse can also be possible. In some cases race and its correlation with native English speaker status may have even led to NNESs being employed as NESs, perhaps because their fair hair and light-coloured eyes and skin made them seem more likely to be native English speakers in the eyes of some audiences (Kim, 2006). Kubota (2002, p. 87) argues that whiteness and the ideal of the native speaker are in a "complicit relation" with each other, prejudicing some against, and causing disadvantages for, NNES teachers who are not white.

A vice-chair of the Association for Japan Exchange and Teaching, a lobby group for assistant teachers in Japan, wrote an article critical of pro-white bias in some Japanese hiring practices, asking "What about native English speakers from India? Why haven't the Philippines been added to the list of participating countries [from which native English speakers could be hired]?" (McConnell, 2000, p. 80). It may be a linguistic prejudice against certain varieties of English that limits natives of some countries who look for work in Japan, and it may also be a discriminatory preference among some administrators and students for what Duppenhaler (1989) called the most marketable attributes of foreigners in Japan: tall people with blond hair and blue eyes. An African respondent to Murphy-Shigematsu's (2002, p. 23) interviews told him "Japanese think Africans are inferior. They even think other Asians are inferior. They can't believe we have a good education. But they look up to Westerners. If an American comes to our department, all the Japanese want to meet him." This pro-white bias has also shown up in language marketing. Piller and Takahashi's (2006) analysis of advertisements from four major English language schools in Japan found that photographs in the advertisements all showed smiling white men. The accompanying text elaborated on the teachers' personal lives, not their teaching credentials, and implied that a female student would learn English quickly because she would be "anxious to see her good-looking, white male teacher again soon" (Piller & Takahashi, 2006, p. 65).

The pro-NES teacher assumption is supported in popular opinion in numerous ways: advertisements that seek NESs to be teachers, regardless of any other qualifications, books with titles like *Teaching English abroad* (Griffith, 2005) that reinforce the idea that professional qualifications are of secondary importance to NES status for language teaching, ELT dictionaries and textbooks based exclusively on native speaker corpora like the Collins COBUILD series and

students who demand only native English speaking teachers (Braine, 1998). There is sometimes the assumptions that simply speaking English well is enough to qualify someone as a teacher (Clayton, 1990; Thomas, 1999). It has been noted that native-speakerism (Holliday, 2006) is now even being extended to discriminate between varieties of native speaker English, so that in certain cases speakers of British English varieties may be favoured over speakers of North American varieties (Braine, 1999).

While discrimination against non-native English speakers and non-native English speaking teachers should not be accepted, it remains generally acknowledged that linguistic differences between the two do exist. The exploration of these differences has led over time to the production of a body of literature that seeks to explain these differences in terms of how they relate to both native and non-native English speaking teachers. There does remain a conservative element which continues to favour NES teachers wholly and uncritically. Honey (1997, p. 252), referring to the idea that NNES teachers do most of the English language teaching in the world, claims that “fortunately the most advanced modern technology is beginning to make access to native-speaker guidance and support a practical possibility even in remote parts”. This comment assumes that somewhere there is the financial and technological ability to bring NES teachers, or at least their guidance and support, to all parts of the world. More worryingly Honey’s comment also posits the necessity for native speakers to assist their NNES colleagues, taking a deficit perspective on NNES linguistic and pedagogical abilities without acknowledging that NES status is no guarantee of teaching ability. Other recent research accepts the idea that NNES teachers have their strengths as teachers, and just as importantly, that NES teachers have their weaknesses.

Standard claims for native English speakers’ superiority as teachers

A common feature of advertisements for language schools in Japan is the suggestion that native English speaking teachers will provide more exposure to English than Japanese teachers of English (Clayton, 1990). This seems to assume the suitability of the input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), the idea that language learners need maximum exposure to the target language to progress in their knowledge of it. Although this hypothesis is controversial in its most extreme form (Prabhu, 1987), it is generally accepted that input is important for language learning. Native English speakers, out of necessity if they are monolingual, are likely to use more English in the classroom than are NNESs (Cook, 1999), who are sometimes reported to lack the linguistic confidence to use English as a medium of instruction (Hyde, 2002). Samimy and Brutt-Griffler’s (1999) survey of beliefs about this issue found that NNES teachers believed NES teachers would provide their students with a model of informal, yet fluent and accurate English.

In addition to providing the most exposure to English, NES teachers by definition provide the best model of the target language as it is spoken by native speakers (Cook, 1999; Mahboob, 2004; Tajino & Tajino, 2000) in a range of communicative situations (Arva & Medgyes, 2000). This may seem self-evident, but it is worth mentioning because in most teaching contexts the native speaker norm remains the standard model. Until governments, universities and other concerned institutions change their targets for language learning away from native speaker models, students will have an interest in learning native speaker English. Research on English learners, such as Tang’s (1997) or Miyazato’s (2002) interviews with students, has often found that students continue to think of NES teachers’ English as their language learning target.

Criticism of the idea that native speaker English is the best model for language learners makes sense in contexts where NES status does not enhance communication (Jenkins, 2000; Phillipson, 1992), but in places where native English norms remain the goal native input may be necessary (Honna & Takeshita, 1998). Native English speakers may not always be internally consistent or in agreement with each other over what constitutes native speaker English (Alptekin, 2002; Christophersen, 1992), but by virtue of them being native English speakers they will provide an accurate model of at least one form of it.

Of course, there is no guarantee that NES teachers will use the same kind of English that students are exposed to in their textbooks or that the teachers will even speak standard English, as few native speakers do (Leung et al., 1997). As more and more NES teachers are hired it becomes evident that while they may provide exposure to authentic English, the varieties spoken by them will increase in number concurrently (Zimmerman, 2007).

Exposure to NES English is the most obvious thing NES teachers can offer their students, but there are others. NES teachers may provide motivation to English learners, especially in a country where students exist on a “cultural island” (Ellis, 1996, p. 215), with little or no contact with English in their everyday lives. English learners in schools that take English as part of the school curriculum may see very little need to study it other than to pass their courses. As one of the student respondents in Miyazato’s (2002, p. 47) interviews reports “Having NSTEs’ (native speaker teachers of English) classes is like an instant studying abroad... being with foreigners is so much fun for me because it rarely happens in my daily life.” NES teachers may provide additional motivation for students, as they attempt to communicate with the teacher, perhaps to teach him or her about their own culture and language (Carless, 2006; Tajino & Tajino, 2000). Conversely, NES teachers can also act as cultural informants, introducing students to their home cultures, which may be of interest to students in some situations and which may provide additional motivation (Ellis, 1996; Tajino & Tajino, 2000).

On the other hand, Lung (1999) has reported that the early increase in motivation provided by having an NES teacher at hand may soon be replaced by a decrease in student participation. Lung’s Chinese secondary school students seemed initially pleased to practise their English with a native speaker, growing more confident as they used their skills. However, students soon began to complain that the NES teacher’s use of songs for young children and emphasis on native-like pronunciation were embarrassing. There were also worries that the focus on oral communication was reducing the time spent on preparing for important government examinations. This is a good example of a case where the use of an NES teacher, if not “culturally attuned and culturally accepted” (Ellis, 1996, p. 213), will create more problems that it might possibly solve.

It has also been suggested that NES teachers offer the most up-to-date ELT methods (Honey, 1997; Quirk, 1990). While this claim is not often made as forthrightly as it is by Honey and Quirk, it is inferred in numerous articles that offer advice on exporting communicative language teaching, a method strongly associated with NES teachers in much of the world, from the West to other countries. This may have been true at one time, if we conveniently forget the fact that teachers in some contexts may not have been interested in NES-driven teaching methods and remained happy with proven methods for their home contexts. The argument that NES teachers are the most pedagogically skilled holds little weight now, when the ready availability of journals, for those who can access them, and the popularity of studying abroad, for those who

can afford it, means that teaching methods can spread quickly if they are popular and NNES teachers have access to up-to-date teaching methods (Takada, 2000). The more important point vis-à-vis NES and NNES teachers and their teaching methods, as Tang (1997) has pointed out, is that as methodological fashions change so do the status of those who teach them. The audio-lingual method of language instruction advocated the complete avoidance of errors, putting NNES teachers in favoured positions because of their perceived superiority with regards to linguistic accuracy. The more recent trend in favour of communicative language teaching favours NES teachers with their supposed superiority as speakers of native English. The balance of power may again shift in favour of NNES teachers when favoured methodologies change again.

Counter-arguments in favour of non-native English teachers

It may be true that NES teachers can offer their students certain advantages, but that doesn't prove that NES teachers are inherently capable of either good teaching or of better teaching than NNES teachers. The assumptions that NES teachers can demonstrably do certain things more effectively than NNES teachers and are therefore better teachers have allowed the NES model of language teaching to remain dominant. NES teachers may provide more exposure to accurate native speaker English, but it is not clear that this is what English learners really need. NES teachers may provide certain kinds of motivation to their students, but NNES may provide their students with different, more powerful, motivation. NES teachers may be aware of the newest Western language teaching methods, but that doesn't mean that NNES teachers are not aware of them, or that those Western methods are even appropriate in all contexts. The re-examination of the NES as ideal English language teacher proposes that NNESs might be equally or even more effective language teachers. Although there are several reasons given for this, one stands out as a key argument; that NNES teachers provide students with an imitable and realistic model of English as it is used by successful non-native English speakers (Tajino & Tajino, 2000).

If NNESs are as likely to become NESs as ducks are likely to become swans (Cook, 1999), perhaps it is not necessary, or even beneficial, for English learners to have an accurate NES model of English in the classroom. They may be better off studying with a NNES teacher, who provides an example of skilled NNES English use (Lee, 2000; Mahboob, 2004; Milambiling, 2000). If students learn to see NNES teachers as realistic "learner models" who have succeeded in mastering English (Medgyes, 1992, p. 346), instead of as failed native speakers (Cook, 1999), students may come to respect their teachers' success and look to emulate them. (On the other hand, one of the NNES teachers in Liu's (1998) survey said he found students were intimidated when they realized how much they would have to study and practice to reach his level of competence. This is an intriguing point that deserves additional study.)

Students will also have the benefit of hearing a NNES's accent, which will almost certainly be different from the British or American accents that are most common in language teaching audio materials. Exposure to accents from around the world is something that is often avoided in language teaching, but listening to these accents can reasonably be assumed to help prepare students for the various different accents they could possibly encounter in their daily lives. Some students may prefer NNES teachers for precisely this reason, as the various NES accents may not be appropriate for all students. Pride in a regional accent and the desire to display features of

one's first language (Jenkins, 2003), or fear of being mocked for speaking differently from one's neighbours (Christophersen, 1992) (i.e. with a native accent rather than the accent displayed by other students in the classroom), may lead students to avoid NES accents.

NNES teachers also have the advantage of being skilled in at least one other language, and have consciously learned English during their own studies (Lung, 1999; Milambiling, 2000), which gives them a rich resource to draw on for examples and comparisons (Ellis, 2004). This may make them more aware of metalanguage, as bilinguals tend to be (Genesee, 1987), and more able to explain and apply English grammatical rules than NES teachers (Medgyes, 1992) who unconsciously acquired English. NNES teachers working with a monolingual class with a shared native language can rely on their native language to teach and to show differences and similarities between it and English (Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999; Tang, 1997). Students in Hong Kong reported favourable attitudes towards their NNES teachers' use of Cantonese in the English language classroom, especially after Cantonese became more prestigious with the return of Hong Kong to Chinese rule (Ling & Braine, 2007). Lung (1999) argues that the use of the students' native language is also more likely to be effective for maintaining discipline with unruly students. NNES teachers can also use the shared native language to provide translations, a method that is often downplayed by monolingual NES teachers but that has the advantages of relating new language learning to students' previous linguistic experiences (Seidlhofer, 1999). NNES teachers will also be experienced in using English as an international language (EIL), that is, using English for purposes that may not be the same as the purposes for which NES teachers use English. Lurda (2004, p. 318) argues that "with the increasing establishment of English as the world lingua franca, non-native speakers will be in optimal positions to lead their students into the realm of EIL".

A NNES teacher may also be better able to teach students learning strategies that served him or her while learning English, to anticipate students difficulties (Ellis & Berger, 2003; Lee, 2000; Medgyes, 1992), and to bond with them (Liu, 1998; Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999). NES teachers, especially those who are monolingual, may be unable to do these things as effectively as NNES teachers. This may be part of the reason that some students feel NES teachers are professionally and academically weaker than NNESs (Holliday, 2005). According to research by Ellis (2006, p. 3) bilingual teachers are more likely to see language learning as "a challenge, but possible and entirely normal", while monolingual teachers can see it as an impossible process. NNESs are by definition at least bilingual and so will be more likely to implicitly and explicitly expect their students to succeed.

As Seidlhofer (1999) argues, the NNES teacher's position is often seen as the weaker one, but in fact it is a stronger one because he or she has experienced what the students are experiencing and has reached the goal they are seeking to reach. An NES monolingual will not have the shared language learning experience to draw upon. Having learned English explicitly is also supposed to make NNES teachers more able to explain grammar, something NES teachers are often thought not to be able to do (Arva & Medgyes, 2000), but there seems to be little evidence for this beyond the anecdotal.

Non-native English speaking EFL teachers often share their students' culture, assuming they are working in their home country or with students from the same background, giving them access to an effective way to teach their students the target language by drawing on their shared cultural

knowledge (Auerbach, 1993; Medgyes, 1992). Such teachers will also know what subjects and materials may not be appropriate for their students, so they can avoid making any inappropriate cultural gaffes by asking their students to do things that may annoy or offend them (McKay, 2000). They know which teaching methods are unlikely to work in their home countries and they will be aware of the importance of covering the curriculum, as successful completion of exams is very important to their students (Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999).

Finally, there is some limited evidence that NNES teachers may expose their students to more complex English in larger lexical chunks than do NES teachers, which is an idea that is counter to the usual claims about pedagogical practices of NES and NNES teachers. Shin and Kellogg (2007) found that a Korean teacher of English asked more questions of her students than did an NES teacher at the same school, which led in turn to the students speaking more English to the Korean teacher than to the NES. The Korean teacher also used more subordination and other grammatically complex sentences than did the NES. Shin and Kellogg largely attribute these differences to the Korean teacher being experienced and the NES teacher being a novice, but a close reading of their article also suggests that the NES might have been using foreigner talk, the simplified language sometimes used by native speakers to those they see as linguistic and social inferiors (Long, 1983; Lynch, 1988). Whatever the reason, Shin and Kellogg's study provides some initial evidence that the almost uncontested claim that it is NES teachers who provide the most exposure to English may not always be true.

Mahboob's (2004, p. 142) survey of ESL learners in the United States found that students held an appreciation for the strengths of both NES and NNES teachers, leading him to conclude that this "shows that students are not naïve and do not necessarily buy into the "native speaker fallacy" (Canagarajah, 1999), that only native speakers can be good language teachers". Unfortunately, this positive attitude is even now not always held by policy makers and employers, making it all the more critical that information is disseminated to them in an effort to promote fairness in employment and better results in student achievement.

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