The non-native speaker teacher
Ali Fuad Selvi

‘Non-native English-speaking teachers’ (NNESTs) have tended to be conceptualized within ELT along the same lines as NNS in general. The second language acquisition literature traditionally ‘elevates an idealized “native” speaker above a stereotypicalized “nonnative”, while viewing the latter as a defective communicator, limited by an underdeveloped communicative competence’ (Firth and Wagner 1997: 285). The resulting (in)competence dichotomy positions the NNS/NNEST as a deficient or less-than-native speaker (cf. ‘near-native’, Valdes 1998). In an attempt to solve this problem, a number of alternative terms have been suggested, for example ‘proficient user’ (Paikeday 1985), ‘language expert’ (Rampton 1990), ‘English-using speech fellowship’ (Kachru 1992), and ‘multicompetent speaker’ (Cook 1999). However, the field is still a long way from reaching a consensus about whether to adopt any of these labels.

Debate about this issue is particularly important in the realm of teaching and learning English as an International Language (Jenkins 2000; McKay 2002). In this context, NNS are estimated to outnumber their ‘NS’ counterparts by three to one (Crystal 2003), the ownership of English is shared by all its speakers, regardless of their ‘nativeness’ (Widdowson 1994), and 80 per cent of English language teachers worldwide are thought to be NNESTs (Canagarajah 2005). Nevertheless, NNESTs are often accorded lower professional status than ‘native English-speaking teachers’ (NESTs) (Mahboob 2010). It is widely accepted that the presence of ‘native speakerism’ (Holliday 2005) of this kind in the English language teaching profession leads to ‘unprofessional favouritism in institutions, publishing houses, and government agencies’ (Medgyes 2001: 433), frequently also resulting in unfair employment discrimination (Selvi 2010).

Phillipson (1992: 185) refers to such unethical treatment of qualified NNESTs as a result of the ‘native speaker fallacy’: a prevalent assumption that ‘the ideal teacher of English is a NS’ (ibid.). Using the NS as a benchmark for teaching employment in this way can cause NNESTs to suffer from the ‘I-am-not-a-native-speaker’ (Suarez 2000) or ‘impostor’ syndrome (Bernat 2009), leading to negative consequences for their teacher persona, self-esteem, and thus their in-class performance as well. Consequently, the global ELT enterprise has been criticized for positioning the NS as the ideal English teacher and thereby creating a false dichotomy between NESTs and NNESTs (Moussu and Llurda 2008). The need to go beyond the NS as a benchmark in English language learning and teaching has therefore been widely argued for in the field (Braine 1999, 2010; Mahboob op.cit.).

Subscribing to the dominant ‘either/or discourse’ (i.e. NEST or NNEST) in this area has also been seen as problematic because it attempts to establish a direct causal relationship between language proficiency and pedagogical practices (Braine op.cit.). Such discriminatory attitudes have led the US TESOL organization to adopt two ‘position statements’ (TESOL 1992, 2006) opposing such discriminatory practices. As a result of such initiatives, the ELT field is now moving towards a more encompassing ‘both/and discourse’ (i.e. NEST and NNEST) that embraces the strengths and limitations of both teacher populations in various teaching settings (Matsuda and Matsuda 2001). This reconceptualization enables cooperation and collaboration that can foster more educationally, contextually, and socially appropriate English language learning opportunities (Mahboob op.cit.). As a result, on a micro level, learners of English as an international language can gain access to a wider sociolinguistic and intercultural repertoire (McKay op.cit.). On a macro level, it lends further support to the establishment of a professional milieu that ‘welcome[s] ethnic, racial, cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity’ (Selvi 2009: 51).


Native English-speaking teachers: always the right choice?

By Marek Kiczkowiak

Have you looked for an English teaching job recently? If you’re a Native English Speaker Teacher (NEST) then you’ll have seen an abundance of teaching opportunities out there. But for a non-native English Speaker Teacher (NNEST), it’s a different story.

Up to 70 per cent of all jobs advertised on tefl.com – the biggest job search engine for English teachers – are for NESTs (yes, I have counted). And in some countries such as Korea it’s even worse – almost all recruiters will reject any application that doesn’t say English native speaker on it.

If you start questioning these practices, you are likely to hear one or all of the following excuses:
1. Students prefer NESTs
2. Students need NESTs to learn ‘good’ English
3. Students need NESTs to understand ‘the culture’
4. NESTs are better for public relations

While it is beyond the scope of this short article to fully debunk all the above, I would like to briefly outline here why these arguments are flawed.

1: The first argument gets repeated like a mantra and has become so deeply ingrained that few attempt to question its validity. Yet, I have never seen a single study that would give it even the slightest backing. On the other hand, I have seen many which confirm that students value traits which have nothing to do with ‘nativeness’, such as being respectful, a good communicator, helpful, well prepared, organised, clear-voiced, and hard working. Other studies show that students do not have a clear preference for either group. It seems then that it is the recruiters, not the students, who want native speakers.

2: On the second point, I believe it’s a myth that only NESTs can provide a good language model. What I find troubling is that many in the profession assume language proficiency to be tantamount to being a good teacher, trivialising many other important factors such as experience, qualifications and personality. While proficiency might be a necessity – and schools should ensure that both the prospective native and non-native teachers can provide a clear and intelligible language model – proficiency by itself should not be treated as the deciding factor that makes or breaks a teacher. Successful teaching is so much more! As David Crystal put it in an interview for TEFL Advocates: ‘All sorts of people are fluent, but only a tiny proportion of them are sufficiently aware of the structure of the language that they know how to teach it.’ So if recruiters care about students’ progress, I suggest taking an objective and balanced view when hiring teachers, and rejecting the notion that nativeness is equal to teaching ability.

3: As for the third argument, most people will agree that language and culture are inextricably connected. But does a ‘native English speaker culture’ exist? I dare say it doesn’t. After all, English is an official language in more than 60 sovereign states. English is not owned by the English or the Americans, even if it’s convenient to think so. But as Hugh Dellar notes, even if we look at one country in particular, ‘there is very clearly no such thing as “British culture” in any monolithic sense’. As native speakers, we should have the humility to acknowledge that no native speakers have experience, or understand all aspects of the culture to which they belong (David Crystal).

4: Finally, the almighty and ‘untouchable’ market demand. Show me the evidence, I say. Until then, I maintain that a much better marketing strategy is to hire the best teachers, chosen carefully based on qualifications, experience and demonstrable language proficiency, rather than on their mother tongue. We are not slaves of the market. We can influence and shape it. As Henry Ford once said: ‘If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have told me: faster horses’.

Perhaps most significant of all, being a NNEST might actually give you certain advantages as a teacher. For example, you can better anticipate students’ problems, serve as a successful learning model or understand how the learners feel. Actually, in a recent post James Taylor went as far as wishing he were a non-native speaker.

However, I feel that the question Peter Medgyes asks is his article: ‘Native or non-native: who’s worth more?’ misses the point slightly. As Michael Griffin has shown, the answer is neither. Both groups can make equally good or bad teachers. It’s all down to the factors I’ve been talking about here: personal traits, qualifications, experience and demonstrable language proficiency. Your mother tongue, place of birth, sexual orientation, height, gender or skin colour are all equally irrelevant.

So why does this obsession with ‘nativeness’ refuse to go away? Because for years the English language teaching (ELT) industry told students that only NESTs could teach them ‘good’ English, that NESTs were the panacea for all their language ills. But let’s be blunt and have the courage to acknowledge that the industry encouraged a falsehood which many of us chose to turn a blind eye to while others assumed they could do nothing. I feel this needs to change. And you can help bring about the change too in numerous ways that were outlined here. So stand up, speak out and join the movement.

The Native Factor in ELT Materials

Clare Fielder

_When using an authentic audio or video it is important to use only English native speakers?_

For me, the most problematic word here is ‘only’. (Problem #2: Define ‘native speaker!’) And so my answer would be a flat out No. But that’s not much of a discussion! And so I’ve decided to re-formulate the question a bit, into: _When should Non-Native Speakers be used in ELT audio & video materials?_

And as with most things ELT… my answer is: It depends! And as always, it is important and interesting to look at what it depends on…

**Students’ language level.** Some commentators say that only NS (=Native Speaker) accents should be used with beginner students, as NNS (=Non-Native Speaker) accents can be harder to understand. I can see some value in the point that accents which are deemed harder to understand for a certain group of learners should maybe be introduced once a good level of grammatical and lexical understanding has been achieved and they have been well prepared for the listening task. But, I think we have to remember that NS also have a huge variety of accents and don’t always speak clearly, so I’m not convinced that ‘hard to understand’ is a NS vs NNS difference….

**Language Learning Goals & Motivations.** For me, this is the key argument regarding listening comprehension: If the students are learning English (or whatever language, really!) in order to be able to communicate with native speakers, for example moving to live or study in a country where English is the main language spoken, then it makes sense to expose them mainly to NS accents and dialects through audio/video material. If they will mainly be communicating with other NNS, then it is rather more important to expose them to these when training listening skills. Indeed, in today’s globalised society, it is becoming less and less realistic to prepare English learners only to communicate with NS, as something like 75% of all interactions in English are between NNS (see Crystal 2003).

I believe students should learn by using materials that are authentic for the contexts in which they are going to need to use English. A case from my own experience: I teach EAP, and when I think about preparing students to participate in seminars at a university in the UK or USA, for example (most popular countries among my students), then I definitely need to prepare them for the fast-paced, messy, interrupted, overlapping discussion, which will probably also involve cultural norms of turn-taking, etc. And it seems to me that the best material for this kind of thing would be authentic recordings of speakers in exactly this kind of seminar setting. However; find me a British university seminar that doesn’t include at least one NNS… probably rather rare these days!

So really, when I think about it, it’s probably the NS + NNS combination that makes most materials most authentic!

Having said that, simply exposing learners to different accents, dialects or varieties of English will probably not suffice to really help them learn and understand – they will need training in listening out for and understanding differences. Though, again, this is not an NS vs NNS point!

So far, I’ve mainly been coming at this topic from a focus on listening comprehension. But there is also another factor in this debate; the speech production side. With this in mind, there is the claim that …

**Students’ need NS pronunciation model.** I’ve recently heard several comments to this effect, and indeed I agree somehow intuitively with the feeling that an NS pronunciation model is better for beginner learners to learn to imitate. But then I do sometimes (when involved in discussions like this) wonder why?

As a basic and overarching goal of any language learning/teaching, I’d take communicative ability and intelligibility. For the sake of the latter, I think maybe learners should not learn to pronounce new vocabulary in their teacher’s accent; if this becomes combined with their own accent, it might render the words incomprehensible to speakers with other L1s! However, several researchers, especially in the area of ELF, have suggested that we shouldn’t necessarily take NS pronunciation/native-speaker-like-ness as the overarching goal of ELT anymore. Still, I do still think that many learners see this as their ultimate goal, and thus it may we what we’re paid for – our job to help them reach it? And besides, the question that then remains for me is How will NNS be mutually intelligible if they’re not taking some kind of vaguely common standard as their starting point?

The native-speaker fever in English language teaching (ELT) [Excerpt]

Eric A. Anchimbe (Munich)

[...] The native speaker: some theoretical implications

The use of the native speaker has a long history in all sub disciplines of linguistics. From methodologies to theories of language study the native speaker occupies a basic position as a springboard for the judgement of language production and evaluation. The major conviction behind the native speaker is that s/he can at anytime give valid and stable judgements on his or her language. S/he is capable of identifying ill-formed grammatical expressions in his or her language even though s/he may not be able to explain exactly why they are ill-formed (Chomsky 1965). Many linguistic schools of thought have based their findings on native-speaker judgements and performances. In transformational-generative grammar, the native speaker is the backbone of Chomsky’s (1965) "ideal-speaker hearer"; in context grammar, van Dijk’s (1977) "P-system" is built on it; in politeness theory, Brown and Levinson’s (1987) "model person" is the native speaker; and the bilingualism theories of Bloomfield (1933) and other American linguists focus on native-like competence in two languages. These theories rely on native-speaker impulse or spontaneity to familiar or strange constructions, well-formed or ill-formed utterances in his or her language. This is accepted as authentic because native speakers acquire their languages at childhood with no other language interfering or influencing the acquisition process.

However, some linguists have used the native speaker as pacesetter of standards even for varieties of the language s/he is not familiar with. In the case of English, it is perhaps motivated by the colonial genesis of the New Englishes - often equated to the colonial definitions of the colonised subjects and regions. Prejudices and bias have been central to descriptions of the New Englishes. For instance, Prator (1968) calls the recognition of post-colonial Englishes a heresy and Hocking (1974: 46), from a similar standpoint, adamantly declares that "the point is that what is correct in a language is just what native speakers of the language say. There is no other standard." While the native speaker may be deemed ideal for ELT, it is far from saying s/he is infallible, as Hocking wants us to believe. This is because "most native speakers of English in the world are native speakers of some nonstandard variety of the language" (Trudgill 1998:35, see also Mufwene 1997). On this ground, they like the non-native speakers (especially those for whom English is an official language) have similar proficiency, professional, and sociocultural stages to deal with. The issue is, a British born and bred in the Yorkshire region and who ends up acquiring the York dialect has the same challenges in achieving ELT proficiency just like a Nigerian born in Lagos, acquires a Nigerian native language or Nigerian Pidgin English and is introduced to English in school.

The exclusively theoretical concept of the native speaker by linguistic schools of thought explained above received social prejudice in the 1970s when (ex)colony states started claiming ownership of varieties of colonial languages, which they used as official and national languages. The distinction non-native speakers became prominent and was based on the perception of the colonial subjects by the colonialists as backward, primitive, non-literate, and unimportant masses. They were therefore considered incompetent speakers, inadequate learners and above all "illegitimate offspring" of English (Mufwene 1994, 2001). An obscure reason for this is that the colonialists intentionally refused to teach English properly to the colonised people for fear that "the coloniser’s code, if shared equally with the colonised, would reduce the distance between the rulers and the ruled" (Kachru 1986: 22). To add to that, "British settlers were most reluctant to use English with their [African] native servants and with Africans in general, as they believed that this knowledge might 'spoil' them in the master-servant relationship that existed" (Abdulaziz 1991: 395). In spite of these misteach or unteach power regulatory mechanisms (see Anchimbe and Anchimbe, forthcoming), it cannot however be upheld that the distinctiveness of post-colonial Englishes is based on the errors promoted by the colonialists. These varieties have been found to be systematic and logical in the variations they exhibit. The question we now ask but would not delve into is, when does one, in this case, cease to be a non-native speaker, when s/he is the only 'reliable' person to make stable judgements about his or her variety of English? It is interesting to note that at this time when more non-native teachers are involved in ELT than native, when English is progressively being detached from the native English-speaking countries, when lesser attention is being paid to accent, when the so-called non-native speakers of English outnumber the native, that some institutions still run after and are caught by the fever of recruiting only (historical) native-speaking teachers.

[...]