

The Strengths and Weaknesses of Native and Non-native Speakers as Teachers of English as a Foreign or Second Language

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In order to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of native-speaker teachers and non-native speaker teachers, we must first analyse the terms ‘native speaker’ and ‘non-native speaker’ and look at the common assumptions and perceptions made about each before analysing how the cultural and linguistic knowledge of the teacher influences his or her effectiveness before finally discussing how the needs of the students come into play.

The earliest definitions of a ‘native speaker’ of a language is someone who learnt to speak that language before any other, from childhood (Cook 2001, 185) and this seems to be the common consensus of the term today despite the controversy with regard to the many cases it may not be so easily applied. The most common assumptions of what it means to be a native speaker, or the speaker of a mother-tongue, according to Rampton (1990, 97), are:

1. A particular language is inherited, either through genetic endowment or through birth into the social group stereotypically associated with it.
2. Inheriting a language means being able to speak it well.
3. People either are or are not native/mother-tongue speakers.

4. Being a native speaker involves the comprehensive grasp of a language.
5. Just as people are usually citizens of one country, people are native speakers of one mother tongue.

However, as she and many others point out (see Medgyes (1992) or Cook (2001) for examples) there are a number of exceptions that do not fit neatly into these criteria or the prior definition. Consider a boy who was born in Italy to an Italian mother and a German father and moved to America at the age of 5 and hence grew up speaking Italian, German and English. Which language (if any) is he a native speaker of? Where do factors such as ability or the order in which the languages that are learnt come into play? As Cook (2001, 187–189) points out, there are great differences in the linguistic abilities of native speakers (as there are in non-native speakers). Some are more or less adept at writing or storytelling, or have larger vocabularies than others while some understand certain dialects or accents better than others or write poetry or songs that others cannot. One would surely have a hard time disputing that the likes of Joseph Conrad and Samuel Beckett have better English than a typical 7-year-old Australian boy, or many adults for that matter, yet the latter is a native speaker and the former are not. Medgyes (1992) makes the point that in order to make sense of the debate, a non-native speaker must be compared to his native-speaker equivalent, and only by eliminating factors such as age, experience, intelligence and education can we make a fair comparison. Medgyes (1992, 341.) also argues that a non-native speaker can never be as creative and original as his native-speaker counterpart because he is too reliant on imitating the native speaker. But is imitation not how native speakers learn as well? And how can we judge accurately what is and is not creative or original, or even ‘good’ English anyway? Whichever view is taken on these terms, the consensus seems to be that they are contentious and controversial and have been for some time, yet they remain in regular use. The

aim of this essay in using these terms is not to condone them, but to challenge the common views and misconceptions brought about by these terms. It is all very well to say that they are outdated or inapplicable from an academic perspective, but the fact is that the perceptions of students and teachers of ESL or EFL in regard to *native-speakerness* can have a significant effect on classroom dynamics. In order to avoid confusion and give a critique on these perceptions, this essay shall adopt the common views of what a native speaker is (someone who learnt English as their first language, still speaks it, and is typically from Canada, America, The United Kingdom, Australia or New Zealand) and what a non-native speaker is (someone who began learning English as a second or foreign language, after their first language).

The fact of the matter is that although there is a great deal of controversy over the terms *native speaker* and *non-native speaker* and what it means to be either, there is a great deal of prejudice in the world of TESOL towards both, least not from employers, students and the teachers themselves. One only needs to browse through popular ESL job websites to see that native speakers are given preference to the vast majority of ESL teaching jobs. Many if these jobs require little or no other qualifications apart from simply being a native speaker and many schools feel they are able to charge more for tuition fees if they employ native speakers. (Canagarajah, 2001, 84–85) But is this preference justified? The feelings of students towards having a native or non-native speaker are more mixed than this preference might indicate. In a survey on students anxiety in the foreign language classroom conducted by ‘Support Group for Foreign Language Learning’ at the University of Texas in 1983, students were presented with the statement “I would feel comfortable around speakers of the foreign language.” to which 52% answered “disagree” or “strongly disagree” and 28% answered “agree” or “strongly agree”. In response to a similar statement “I would *not* feel nervous speaking the foreign language with native speakers.” 66% answered “disagree” or “strongly disagree” while just 17% answered “agree” or “strongly

agree” (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope 1986, 129–130). As these results would indicate, and as Cook (2001, 200) points out, many students are intimidated by the prospect of speaking with a native speaker and may “prefer a more fallible model” that a non-native speaker teacher provides. This point is supported by results found in a study conducted between December, 1996 and July, 1997 at “a major Midwestern university in the United States” where non-native ESL teachers and their students were interviewed about their teaching effectiveness. “Mr. K” a Korean L1 speaker attested:

Students have told me that my being a Korean-American (as opposed to being an American) helped them in the sense that they thought I could understand their position (problems, etc.) better than an American teacher could... To a lesser extent, I seem to have a similar rapport with Asian students in general, and to a still lesser extent, with all my students (because of my “non-native-like appearance”).

This was backed up by “Mr. D” a Dutch L1 speaker, who reported:

My students knew from day one that I was not a NS. But they did not show any kind of resentment. On the contrary, I had the feeling that they considered me as one of them, but with both knowledge and training in the specific field of ELT. (Liu, 1999, 160-172).

However, it appears that this can go either way, as some students indicated that they were intimidated by their teacher “Mr. C”, a Cantonese L1 speaker, because of the fact that he was a non-native speaker and he had achieved such a high level of English. (Liu, 1999, 169).

Despite these generally positive views, non-native teachers often harbour great insecurities about their own language abilities, whether these are warranted or unwarranted, which can have adverse effects on their performance (Medgyes

1992, 348). These negative self-images are often reinforced by the students' preconceptions about their non-native teachers as Amin (1997, 581) explains:

When the students give the message that they consider their teacher to be a non-native speaker of English and therefore one who cannot teach them the English they want or feel they need, minority teachers are unable to effectively negotiate a teacher identity. In such a classroom, minority teachers, no matter how qualified they are, becomes less effective in facilitating their students' language learning than, perhaps, white teachers.

Because of these negative preconceptions, non-native speakers often feel they have to go through extra lengths to conceal their non-nativeness by focussing on concealing their accent or other ways to try to sound like a native speaker at the detriment on focussing on pedagogy and how to be a good teacher. (Canagarajah, 1999, 84–85).

So far we have looked at the image of the native and non-native speaker teacher as perceived by their students, themselves and in general, but specific implications are brought about by the difference in language ability between the two types of teacher? Generally it can be said that the native speaker has an advantage in terms of language proficiency over the non-native speaker and this is generally speaking a positive asset for a language teacher, as a teacher with little or no language ability will surely be less effective than one who is proficient. However, as Medgyes (1992, 346) points out, there are many hidden advantages to the non-native speaker teacher's language "deficiency":

- a. Only non-NESTS can serve as imitable models of the successful learner of English.
- b. Non-NESTS can teach learning strategies more effectively.
- c. Non-NESTS can provide learners with more information about the English

language.

- d. Non-NESTS are more able to anticipate language difficulties.
- e. Non-NESTS can be more empathetic to the needs and problems of their learners.
- f. Only non-NESTS can benefit from sharing the learners' mother tongue.

With regard to the last point, there is a view from believers of the communicative teaching method that the students' L1 should not be used at all in teaching and all interaction should occur in the language being learnt. However, Cook (2001, 190–191) makes the point that teaching a language involves adding an L1 to a brain that already contains an L1 and that how a language is processed is based on the student's L1 knowledge, and most pertinently that the L1 is always present in the learning process whether it is visible or not (Cook 2001, 202). To contrast, speaking from my own experience of learning Japanese and teaching English, I would add that interacting entirely in the language being learnt creates momentum and encourages students to think and process information in that language, especially at higher levels, and therefore L1 processing may be less important at times. Whether the students' L1 is used or not in the classroom, there are great benefits in knowing the students' L1 with regard to understanding their linguistic problems and needs. As Littlewood (2004) points out, there are many complications in learning a second language created by L1 interference, which he categorises with the four terms *transfer*, *generalisation*, *imitation* and *imitation*. The teacher who understands these elements and the differences and similarities between the students' L1 and the language being taught is better equipped to exploit them and target problematic areas. Therefore we can conclude in the words of Medgyes (1992, 348) “The ideal NEST is the one who has achieved a high level of proficiency in the learner's mother tongue” and “The ideal non-NEST is the one who has achieved near-native proficiency in English.”

However, in comparing native and non-native speaker teachers, equally

important to the strictly linguistic knowledge mentioned is the teacher's cultural knowledge. Any given language has its own culture-specific concepts that may have no equivalent in the language being learnt (Baker 1992, 21–30). The Japanese use the phrase *yoroshiku onegaishimasu* which is often translated as *nice to meet you*, although directly translated it could be *well please* and can be used not only to express the good intentions of people meeting for the first time, but also those of students towards their teacher at the beginning of a class or between the members of two companies at the beginning of a business meeting. Likewise there are many words in English that do not have an equivalent in other languages, such as *savoury* and *home* (Baker, 1992). A teacher who is not familiar with the culture of their students may not pay enough attention to these concepts or find it difficult to understand why their students have problems comprehending them. An important factor of language proficiency as identified by Hymes (1972, 285) is *appropriateness*. Certain language can evoke different feelings and intentions of the speaker by conveying politeness, annoyance, uncertainty or admiration, and this is unique in each culture or language. Also unique to each culture is what language is appropriate to use in certain situations. In Japanese, it is customary to say *osaki ni shitsurei shimasu* (*excuse me for leaving before you*) when going home from work before another colleague, whereas this would not normally be deemed necessary in most western countries. More than often in an ESL / EFL classroom, especially when the teacher is a native speaker of English or the materials used are designed by native speakers, the culture that is learnt and enforced through the language is that of English speaking countries. This can be either be motivating or uninteresting and irrelevant depending on the aims of the learner as some learners are willing to adapt to the foreign culture, others learn English for use within their own culture or wish to keep their own cultural identity (McKay, 2003, 10). Another important culture-related factor in the classroom is the way the class itself is taught. Most native speaker teachers who follow the communicative teaching method subscribe to the western view

that volunteering in class is a sign of showing interest and comprehension in the classroom and tend to make the classes students focussed with emphasis on group discussion and pair-work activities, whereas the Chinese view is that volunteering is equated to showing off and preventing valuable teacher talk time and such discussion activities are a waste of time as they prefer to focus on the teacher (McKay, 2003, 13–15). Hence certain activities may be more or less effective in a language classroom and the teacher’s knowledge of these cultural factors will be beneficial in getting the most out of the students.

Most importantly of all perhaps in comparing the effectiveness in native and non-native teachers is the needs of the students and what English is to be taught. Despite the fact that over 80% of TESOL teachers are non-native speakers (Canagarajah, 1999, 91), TESOL pedagogy and the production of materials used in the classroom is dominated by native speakers (Canagarajah, 1999, 86). The language taught in these classes is based on the assumption that students are aiming for native-like proficiency despite the fact that the largest group of users of English use it on a daily basis without the presence of native speakers (Seidholfer, 2001, 141). As Seidholfer (2001, 141) points out “The primary concerns for this domain are efficiency, relevance and economy in language learning and language use.” This group of English learners are not concerned with imitating the native speaker, so surely a native speaker teacher is not necessary for their needs. On the contrary, in many such contexts using native-like English can be seen as distasteful, snobbish or pedantic (McKay, 2003, 7). While these L2 speakers seem content to use their own brand of English pertinent to their own needs, there seems to be an inferiority complex created by the fact that L2 users of English are compared to native speakers (Cook 2001, 185). Butcher (2005, 21–22) describes the “red pen” view of English where native English is seen as correct and all other forms as inferior as a form of imperialism, and he makes the point that adapting is what languages do best and they should be allowed to do so. Indeed it seems that many of the problems that face L2 users of English are

created by this ‘English’ is based on native speaker English (Seidholfer, 2001, 137–138). So, as to which kind of teacher is more effective depends largely on the needs of the learner. A native speaker may be more effective in teaching those who wish to use English in English speaking countries, while non-native speakers may be more effective in other cases (Canagarajah, 1999, 89).

To conclude it seems that the effectiveness of the teacher, whether a native or non-native speaker, is dictated firstly by the needs of the learner and secondly how the linguistic and cultural knowledge of the target language and the language being learnt match those needs. Also, it can be said that a re-imagining of English on an international scale and the images of native and non-native speakers is a key factor in empowering teachers and students of English and helping them achieve their goals.

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