

HPEN 7006 Assignment 2

Qing He (UWTSD Student ID: 2306690)

The Beautiful Bubble Myth ——My View on the Differences between Native and Non-native Speakers of English

Introduction

In my mind, there are several absurd and stereotypical myths in the contexts where English is acquired as the second language (more often learned as the foreign language) and one of them is the blind and excessive preference on native English-speaking teachers (NEST). It is prevalent that English language teaching institutions internationally, either public or private, usually prefer to employ teachers of native English speakers (NEST) and promote them as a marketing strategy and an important selling point to attract the potential customers because they are regarded as ‘ideal’ teachers (Pham, 2021, p.177). By contrast, a large group of qualified and experienced English teaching practitioners, the majority of English teachers globally, are less privileged and unequally treated in an explicit or implicit way, failing to get employed or promoted in the ELT industry merely because of the identity of non-native English speaking teacher (NNEST), who are regarded as inferior, ‘second class citizens in the realm of language teaching’(Llurda and Calvet-Terré, 2022, p. 3). Therefore, the social inequality should be reflected, challenged, or at least further investigated and the present essay, written on the position of the non-native teacher of English, aims to discuss and analyze the differences between native and non-native speakers of English, together with my personal thoughts in the end.

1. The Definitions of Native and Non-native speakers of English

The definition of native/non-native speaker seems to be a common-sense idea which is widely used ‘in the professional jargon of both teachers and researchers today as ever’(Árva and Medgyes, 2000, p.356). As defined by Collins Dictionary, native speaker refers to ‘someone who speaks that language as their first language, rather than having learned it as a foreign language’. Accordingly non-native speakers are those who acquire or learn a language as their second or foreign language. Since English is so widely used as a global language, linguistically termed as the ‘lingua franca’, the native/non-native speakers of English are extensively focused and studied in applied linguistics and language education. Since the present essay aims to explore the differences in its implication on English language teaching and education, two other similar but more relevant terms are more compared here: native-English speaking teachers (NEST) and non-native English speaking teachers (NNEST) , and studies show that there are existing tension between the two lines of research respectively on NEST and NNEST due to their respective strengths and weaknesses (Llurda and Calvet-Terré, 2024). Admitting both the pros and cons of both NEST and NNEST, I will present my thoughts from the position as the non-native English speaking teacher.

2. My view on the problems for the English teaching practitioners for either NEST or NNEST

Clear and straightforward as the concepts are, limitations or even discrimination exist in the understanding and practices of those terms. There are heavily prevalent phenomenon of NEST preference or craze in TEFL-related job markets. Advertisements that employ English teachers are seen to label one requirement: 'Native English Speaker only' and sometimes adds another irritating statement of 'No experience needed'. Moreover, NEST, in some employers' mind, only refer to the citizens of the USA, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, those countries categorized as "Inner Circle" countries by Kachru (1985). Besides, in the plenary session speech entitled 'Because you're all worth it' during 57th IATEFL International Conference just recently, Zarina Subhan, a British freelance English language materials writer, teacher trainer who teaches English in different countries, shared her experience of being regarded as a waitress instead of an English teacher just because of dark skin and therefore she urges the ELF colleagues to encourage the students to explore complex perspectives and characteristics of each individual.

What we can imply from those social stereotypes is that if someone is born in certain country or with a certain skin color, he or she is inherently given an incomparable privilege to be employed as an English teacher, almost regardless of any other qualifications, teaching skills and abilities while the vast majority of NNESTs with qualifications and experience are likely to be excluded, rejected and dismissed only because of their non-Inner-Circle identity. For me, it is a way of dealing with educational and linguistic issues with political standards, which not only discriminates NNESTs, but also have negative impact on NESTs as well from a long term, since it covers the complex requirements of being a qualified English teacher.

3. The Major differences between NEST and NNEST

To address the above-mentioned problem, it is helpful to identify the differences between NEST and NNEST and analyze whether those differences play a significant role on EFL learners. These differences are widely analyzed from quite a number of books and papers with different positions. To name a few, Davies, A. (2003), holds a standpoint of native-speaker supporter frames the characteristics of native speakers from psycholinguistic, linguistic, sociolinguistic, communicative competency aspects; similarly, Juan de Dios Martinez Agudo (2017) compares the NEST and NNEST, in different chapters, from linguistic, psycholinguistic and pedagogical approaches; besides, in a book entitled *The Non-native Teacher* written by Medgyes (1994), two major categories of difference were hypothesized: language proficiency and teaching behavior. The essay will categorize and analyze the differences mainly from linguistic and teaching aspects.

3.1.1 English Language proficiency

English proficiency reveals the fundamental factor to distinguish native English speaker from non-English speaker. As summarized by Árvai and Medgyes (2000), NNESTs are perceived to speak poorer English, use 'bookish' language and use English less confidently and own declarative knowledge of English, while NESTs speak better English, use real, natural language, use English more confidently and

have procedural knowledge instead. These superiority of NESTs can be shown from their proficiency in fluency and complexity. The complexity of vocabulary use, especially slang, idioms, verbal phrases etc. as well as the syntax structures stand NESTs out from NNESTs. Beyond fluency and complexity, NESTs use of language is typically more natural and derived from their life experience and therefore updated since language is always dynamically changing. This is particularly helpful in helping students understand the flexibility and varieties of English language. Medgyes (1994) found that the ideal native speaker's pronunciation, vocabulary and intonation as clear advantage for learners and can be regarded as role models. From my personal experience as an EFL teacher, educated mostly in the context of EFL for decades, I use English a lot in my modules, but I still have difficulties in understanding different accents of English, pronounce many specific words correctly when immersed in the target language setting in the UK, let alone produce the authentic and colloquial spoken English. In my mind, for the vast majority of EFL learners who only learn English within classroom and have no real exposure to real target language context, native-like English is like an unreachable ideal or goal. The attempts to be native-like English speakers should be realistic and be advocated only within realistic goals. Although it is true that most non-native English teachers may not acquire native-like English, they can still achieve high level of English proficiency with efforts. Braine (1999) goes further suggesting that non-native speakers might also lack vital communicative competence. This is because they tend to only use the taught language in the classroom and might therefore lack regular non-teaching engagement with the language and native speakers. Their use of language could be outdated and too formal for everyday use. This is true, but the standardized English tests for the EFL learners mainly focus more on testing general English as well as their academic English abilities. The everyday and updated colloquial English sounds cool, but does not count so much in equipping the learners in tests and studies.

3.1.2 Cultural understanding and teaching

Since language is the carrier and representation of certain culture, the differences can be seen from culture knowledge and understanding. Born in the L2 setting, NESTs are able to present more authentic, latest, personalized and detailed L2 culture knowledge or information to the L2 students, compared to NNESTs, which is definitely their advantage. However, as every sword has two blades, NNESTs on the other hand can help students access to L2 culture from their unique perspective because of their personal experience, understanding, insights and interpretations as an EFL learner. The cultural understanding or cultural scaffolding do count because the teachers can empathize with the students' obstacles in understanding and applying the cultural knowledge. In other words, NNESTs have the advantage to help students to understand L2 culture and have easier access to L2 culture.

3.2 Teaching aspects

3.2.1 General teaching attitudes

Different teaching attitudes are listed by Medgyes (1994). For NESTs, they tend to adapt a more flexible approach and are more innovative, less empathetic in their

classroom. They are more casual, and less committed and they have far-fetched expectations in their teaching while NNESTs usually adopt a more guided approach and are more cautious, empathetic. Since they share the same socio-cultural and educational context and have similar learning experience, they have more realistic teaching expectations and they are more strict and committed in class managements. It does reveal that NESTs in general are less competitive when teaching skills, meta-linguistic knowledge and cultural empathy are involved.

3.2.2 Language teaching attitude

Again, as found by Medgyes (1994), possibly caused by the differences in linguistic proficiency, NESTs are less insightful into meta-linguistic knowledge, and they are believed to focus more on fluency, meaning, oral skills, colloquial registers, and practical use of language compared to NNESTs, who are instead more insightful, and focus more on accuracy, form, grammar rules, formal registers, which are definitely beneficial to instrumentally motivated students in the EFL settings.

3.2.3 Language teaching strategies and practices

The strategies and practices between NESTs and NNESTs differ in several details. The former tends to teach in certain context, prepare free activities, favor groupwork/pairwork, use materials from authentic sources. They tolerate errors and mostly use no or less first language and almost do not code-switch or translate. Instead, NNESTs prefer and organize more controlled activities, depend more on textbook, use more L1 and translation in the teaching. If NESTs only use monolingual English in the classroom without translation into L1, the students might have great difficulty understanding some abstract concepts. Without the translating process from L1 to target language in ELT, students will have fewer chances to get insight into the metalinguistic knowledge of both languages.

3.2.4 Teaching effects or students' beliefs

The teaching effects of NESTs and NNESTs are found to be significantly different. In the empirical research by Ghane and Razmi (2023), students taught by NESTs were found to demonstrate greater fluency and lexical complexity in their oral production, while those taught by the NNESTs showed greater accuracy in their spoken language production. The findings are predictable due to the differences compared above. Possibly due to these separate advantages, studies show that students and L2 teachers in China tend to take a more objective and holistic attitude towards the qualities of an English teacher. Wang, L. (Evelyn) and Fang, F. (Gabriel) (2020) found that teachers and students in China do not perceive a significant difference between NESTs and NNESTs and that qualified NESTs cannot be deified merely due to their native speaker identity. Similarly, Deng, Zhang and Mohamed (2023) found that actually NNEST and Chinese English-major students had similar view on language teachers' qualifications. They all valued prerequisite qualities of expert knowledge, language skills, and professionalism, which indicates that the students are more objective towards nativeness and against native-speakerism. By investigating the difference between NESTs and NNESTs in students' attitude toward and motivation for learning English, Pae (2017) found students taught by NEST held more positive attitudes toward learning and were more motivated to learn English. However, they have

significant higher level of anxiety in NEST classroom than in NNEST classroom. Instead, NNESTs can be a clear example and motivator for their students. They are the model to encouraging the students who are struggling to learn English and they are able to share the experience/ strategies they used to find success, which are more suitable.

In all, these studies show the existing advantages and disadvantages of both NESTs and NNESTs. However, these characteristics are only comparatively true and we could see that they are some NNESTs who reach almost native-level proficiency and NESTs who have good command of declarative knowledge. We should not exaggerate the differences and overemphasize either side of it.

4. Personal thoughts on the differences and the implications

Having analyzed the detailed differences in linguistic and teaching aspects, I would like to think critically on this issue from the following aspects.

4.1 Putting Learners' needs into consideration

When talking about the qualities of being an English teacher, we should be fully aware that English learning is learner-driven process therefore we cannot ignore the various needs of the learners. For the EFL setting, such as China, English language is a subject embedded into the compulsory curriculum system from elementary education to higher education including the doctoral level. For the vast majority of Chinese English learners who do not need to use English in their life or work, their motivation is instrumentally exam-oriented and they learn English primarily for passing the exams. To pass different level of localized English tests in China such as College English Test (band-4), learners are assessed with separate listening (35% of the score), reading (35%), writing (15%), translating(15%) and speaking (optional). To cater for the learners' needs, the role of an English teacher in different educational phases, is to instruct grammar rules and test papers and train the learners to familiarize different sections of test papers. From this aspect, NNESTs are the right person to undertake the job, even if they can not speak or write English very well. teaching style typically deployed by NNESTs may also be more effective than their NESTs because they may seek to integrate language into situational contexts to provide real-life relevance for students, whilst native speakers tend to teach using abstract principles. NESTs do play an important role in boosting the students' interest in conversational communication, in satisfying students' curiosity of the Western culture, and in providing a different approach to study. However, NESTs are supplementary in Chinese English education in public institutions, or in any other countries where English is the foreign language. It's true that there are schools which aim at preparing the students to study abroad, but they are just very minority part of Chinese education. For most L2 learners, they actually don not need to native-like speakers and they should aim to become an effective L2 speakers, because most interactions happen in the EFL settings (Llurda, E. and Calvet-Terré, J., 2022). Or even when they use English in authentic L2 setting, their Englishes are easily understood, tolerated and improved by native speakers. Regarding NESTs as the pure language providers and protectors are too idealistic and violates the nature of lingua franca, a language commonly used by people of different native languages. The

English learning target of native-like English is almost an unrealistic dream for most EFL learners.

4.2 Native speakers themselves are different.

As defined earlier, native English speakers are those who have English as their first language and those who are from the Inner Circles countries are preferred and more welcomed. However, the conditions of native speakers can be very complex. For a large parts of those Inner Circles countries where immigration are common and multilingual communities are widespread, some children are born in bilingual context. For example, in Wales it's hard to distinguish their first language from their second one and Welsh people in general can speak both Welsh and English very well. Even in the English monolingual context, the varieties and dialects of English can even shock the English learners in the world, because the English spoken by those native speakers with strong regional accents are not in accordance with the Received Pronunciation that people hear from mass media. What's more, there are even diverse varieties in the Inner Circles countries. American English and British English differ obviously in a large number of words, let alone the idioms, slang, etc. Much less encountered in some varieties such as Canadian English, Australia English, the students may be puzzled and mix them. Therefore, the NESTs with different authentic varieties of Englishes are good, but there are group of them who might not be regarded as the ideal model to learn from or imitate.

4.3 What counts as an English language teacher

In this essay, the differences are found and listed by previous studied, but they are expected to be seen as basic traits that can be improved. In other words, although there are significant characteristics between NEST and NNEST, there are common nuclear requirements or qualifications for being a qualified language teacher. Derwing and Munro (2005, p. 185) argued that, 'sufficient language proficiency and metalinguistic knowledge are essential to become a qualified English teacher no matter whether they are NSs and NNSs'. To be a language teacher, one should be equipped with both the abilities of language and teaching or even more. They should be able to have a good command of English as well as metalinguistic knowledge, and they should also be able to be articulate, logical, expressive and as a good communicator as a teacher. I mean those above mentioned differences between NEST and NNEST are not stilled permanently, but instead, each side of the ELT teaching community should be motivated to grow and develop themselves and strive for being a qualified English teacher who can obtain the sense of achievements. For NESTs, owning native English is an incomparable advantage, but it is far from enough and the nativeness does not ensure their success in ELT. With the processing of internalization and information technology as well as the widespread concept of *lingua franca*, people might access to native speakers more easily and EFL learners, institutions tend to have more objective view towards what counts to be an English teacher in their specific context. Over-emphasis on nativeness does not play a positive role in EFL teacher development. As what's said in CATESOL 2013, 'Teaching job announcements that indicate preference or requirement for a 'native' speaker of English trivialize the professional development teachers have received and teaching

experience they have already acquired. Such announcements are also discriminatory and ultimately harm all teachers (native or not) by devaluing teacher education, professionalism, and experience.' I can't agree more since I argue that either NESTs or NNESTs should make use of their own advantage and have themselves grow to cater to the ever increasing demands of EFL learners.

4.4 What to expect in the future

Based on the analyses so far, let's plan what would happen in the future as a non-native speaking English teacher.

On the one hand, NNESTs should realize that they play an irreplaceable role in facilitating L2 learners and boost confidence by building linguistic competence constantly. On the other hand, both NESTs and NNESTs could collaborate through a professional learning community, explore and initiate new teaching modes by making use of advantages of both side. What's more, the myth of exaggerating the importance should be corrected and the L2 settings worldwide are expected to take a more objective and scientific view towards native-speakerism.

Conclusion

The essay analyzes the linguistic and teaching differences between NESTs and NNESTs, and presents personal thoughts towards these differences and future expectations. Finally, let's get rid of the myth of native-speakerism and end by citing what David Crystal once said in an interview by about the disputes over judging native/non-native English speaking teachers: 'I wouldn't judge teachers in their native or non-native speaking ability. I'd judge them in terms of how good they are as teachers; how good their awareness was of the relationship between my language and theirs and how well they can anticipate the difficulties that I might encounter.' (Crystal, 2012, p. 31).

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