

Content: **Assignment 2 of HPEN7006 - Current Theories of Second Language**

Student: Liang Yuan

Supervisor(s): Dr Jessica Clapham

School: University of Wales, Trinity Saint David

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What is the difference between the native and non-native speakers of English?

Abstract:

In this essay, I discuss the differences based on the literature review on the position of the non-native teacher of English. First of all, I introduce my own experience with native and non-native speaker teachers as an English learner as well as an English educator. Then, I elaborate the background knowledge of World of Englishes. Based on this, I attempt to clarify the differences between native English speakers and non-native English speakers. Next, I demonstrated the results of some research projects on students expectations of their teachers. After that, I compare the advantages and disadvantages of native and non-native speakers in English Language Teaching (ELT). Finally, I propose what an ideal teacher is.

Keywords:

native English speakers, non-native English speakers, World of Englishes, ELT and ideal teacher

1. Introduction

I began to learn English as a “subject”, like Mathematics and Physics at the age of 14 in a small rural high school in the 1980s China. In those days, English learning materials, such as tapes of English recorded by native speakers were rare. If you were lucky, your relatives in big cities might buy you an English-Chinese dictionary and mail it you. It was like to see a panda in the wild to meet a foreigner on the street at that time. Don’t mention to be taught by a native English speaker teacher. The only source of learning English available is your Chinese English teacher and a textbook of English. In such environment, I have been taught by my Chinese English teachers until I went to college, when I met my first foreign English teacher, a graceful and exotic lady from the east of England, who spoke with beautiful RP (Received Pronunciation) English accent and allowed me to see what a native English speaker was like.

After decades of development, China has become a much more prosperous and open country that embrace the people and culture around the world. Nowadays, most of Chinese children usually begin to learn English at a much earlier age (around 9 or 10) when they are in Grade 3 in primary school. Many of their schools can afford to hire foreign teachers and they can have the opportunity to be taught by native English speaker teachers. If they are lucky be from affluent families, their parents can send them to private international schools where they receive international education in an international environment, when they are even younger. However, the majority of Chinese students still learn English from their Chinese English teachers until they finish college.

Ever since I graduated from college, I have basically worked a teacher of English in schools of various levels (primary school, high school and college), and a translator of English-Chinese

languages for translation companies or overseas study agency. I have witnessed a lot of successes and failures of Chinese English learners. I cannot deny the fact that students having opportunity to be taught by native speaker teachers or from international school have a much broader view of the world, and that if they can continue to go abroad for further learning, it is possible that they can achieve native-like English fluency. However, it often surprises me that these students do not necessarily make greater academic achievements in terms of their English learning than those who learn English from Chinese English teachers. It provokes my even deeper thinking when I know the fact that some of the interpreters (simultaneous interpreters are believed to have the best command of English) working for top Chinese government officials receive their language training within only specialized foreign languages universities in China and never step abroad.

Therefore, such questions often occur to me:

- 1) Who are native English speakers? Who are non-native English speakers? And what are the differences between these two groups?
- 2) Do native English speakers necessarily make better English teachers than non-native English speakers?
- 3) In this globalised world, where English is used as a lingua franca, what varieties of English speakers are exactly using it & where is it used?
- 4) What are the expectations of language learners of their teachers?

2. World of Englishes

To better understand the concept of native English speaker teachers (NEST) and non-native English speaker teachers (NNEST), we need to have a background knowledge of World of Englishes. This term is invented to describe the emerging varieties of English that came into being in countries under the influence of the United Kingdom of Great Britain or the United States of America. When the “new world” was discovered, large number of migrants from England, Scotland and Ireland, whose mother-tongue was English, moved to North America, the Caribbean, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand. Over the years, they developed their English dialects into modern American, Canadian, West Indian, South African, Australian, and New Zealand Englishes; moreover, English is brought to Asia and Africa as the result of colonisation in countries on these continents, where English became their second language; English is also learned as a foreign language and used almost only for international communication in countries, such as in China, Russia and Japan.

Throughout history, linguists have proposed many models to try to classify English speakers across the world. Braj Kachru's model of World Englishes, also known as “Three Circles of English”, is perhaps the most influential models that attempt to demonstrate how the English language is spread to all parts of the world. The three Circles of English are The Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle. The Inner Circle refers to English as it originated from England and was carried to other parts of the world, such as Ireland, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and some of the Caribbean territories. Singapore, much like Ireland, may be joining the Inner Circle as English is more often spoken as a native language. In

the Inner Circle, English is used as a primary language, with a total of 390 million people speaking it as their native language.

According to Braj Kachru, the Outer Circle of English came into being when the English language was spread with colonisation by the United Kingdom in Asia and Africa. Countries in this Outer Circle include India, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malaysia, Tanzania, Kenya, non-Anglophone South Africa, the Philippines and others. In these countries, English is not the native language, but a lingua franca used in schools, courts, governments and business. An estimated number of 160 million to 310 million people speak English in this circle as a second language.

At last, the Expanding Circle is composed of countries where English has little to do with their history or government. However, English is widely learned at school and used as a tool of communication across international borders. The estimated number of English users in the Expanding Circle range from 100 million to one billion in the countries, including non-Anglophone Europe (especially the Netherlands and Nordic countries), South Korea, Egypt, China, Japan, Nepal, Russia, and the rest of the world.

3. Who are native English speakers?

The above background knowledge of World of Englishes may help us to understand who native English speakers are. Basically, people speaking English in the Inner Circle are native English speakers. It gives us a deeper insight into the concept if we examine the definitions given by some famous linguists. Based on an interview with Crystal, David. (2014), native speakers are people who learned their mother tongue through child acquisition processes. In 1991, Davies provided the keynote definition: “The first language a human being learns to speak is his/her native language; he/she is a native speaker of this language”. That is to say, if you learnt the first language (L1) in your childhood, you are a native speaker of L1, which was referred to by Davies (1996, p. 156) as the “bio-developmental definition”. You cannot change this historic fact to be a native speaker in this sense; you cannot alter your mother tongue just like you can change who brought you up.

Some people argue that native speakers possess certain characteristics in common that exclusively belong to them. Here is a list of 9 of them:

- 1) They are not conscious of the knowledge of language rules when they are using their native language.
- 2) They can grasp of meanings of their native language out of intuition.
- 3) They are able to communicate at ease in various social situations using native language.
- 4) They possess a wide range of language skills.
- 5) They are able to use their native language creatively.
- 6) They share the same identity with a language community.
- 7) They are able to make speeches in the common language fluently.
- 8) They can understand the differences between their own discourse and the standard language.
- 9) They can translate other languages into their native language.

These characteristics give us an in-depth insight into the nature of native speakers. However, it is

interesting to note that there are always exceptions to these and that some of these characteristics can be debated. For example, not all the native speakers know how their speech differs from the standard language (8); the language competency among native speakers vary to a large degree, with some of them speaking eloquently and some of them far from being fluent in their mother tongue. Examples are Stephen Hawking and Helen Keller, both of whom were native speakers of English, but both need to communicate through modern technology (7); it is also obvious that being able to communicate in social situations has much to do with individuals' personality, rather than being a native speaker or not (3); according to Chomsky, any original comprehensible utterance or sentence is creative. In a literary sense, only a select few mother tongue users, such as poets and rappers have true creativity (5); only those native speakers who can speak a second language are able to interpret, which is not necessarily an ability possessed by all L1 speakers (9); native speakers can cut their relationships completely off their native language community politically or socially while still retaining their native speaker status. Examples are James Joyce leaving his homeland-Ireland and exiled to Zurich, Karl Marx who left Germany and lived in London. Another one is Albert Einstein who abandoned his German citizenship and immigrated to the United States (6).

These characteristics vary with individuals. We cannot simply say that someone is not a native speaker if they lack any of them. According to Péter Medgyes (1992), "the native speaker/non-native speaker dichotomy is controversial from a purely linguistic point of view". As no one has full command of English. All people who use English are more or less accomplished learners. They are all placed at certain points on the English language competency continuum from zero to native at a certain point of their learning process. Some renowned researchers even recommended to replace native and non-native speaker with such terms as "*more or less accomplished users of English* (Edge, 1988), *more or less proficient users of English* (Paikeday, 1985), *expert speakers and affiliation* (Rampton, 1990), *English-using speech fellowships* (Kachru, 1985) and *educated English speaker*."

However, Péter Medgyes also claims that users of English as their mother tongue have a definite advantage over people who use it as a foreign language and that this advantage is more significant than any other factors, be that motivation, preference, aptitude, attitude, experience, education, or anything else. This is because non-native speakers of English depend on the norms set by the native speakers. Non-native speakers of English always imitate or learn to copy the language of native speakers.

4. Who are non-native English speakers?

If native speakers are people who have learned their mother tongue through child acquisition processes (Crystal, David. 2014), non-native speakers should be those who have acquired a certain language when have grown up rather than as a baby. However, the linguistic boundary between these two groups of speakers is blur. Consider this example, Ian, aged 10, who has been going to school in China for 6 years. His father is a Russian businessman working in China, his Korean mother lives with them. His father speaks to Ian in Russian and his mother in Korean. Which is Ian's native language, Russian, Korean, or Chinese? All three languages are his native language?

None of them? Another question that needs to be addressed is: Does a native English speaker necessarily speak better English than non-native English speaker? Let's take another example, a Chinese teacher who has received his PhD in English language, and a ten-year old English shepherd or twelve-year-old American schoolboy, who speak better English?

Paikeday (1985) suggested "using the term 'proficient user' of a language to refer to all speakers who can successfully use it". Davies (1991, 2003) argued "a non-native language learner can become a native speaker of the target language, and master the intuition, grammar, spontaneity, creativity, pragmatic control, and interpreting quality of 'born' native speakers. "

Recent year saw a number of studies that prove non-native language learners can pass as native speakers in some contexts. In 2005, Inbar-Lourie discovered that nearly half of the non-native English speaker teachers interviewed as subjects in her research thought that other non-native speakers considered themselves as native speakers, which means that Inbar-Lourie's data reveal that many speakers who do not consider themselves as native speakers can in fact be qualified as native speakers in certain situations. In contrast, some teachers who consider themselves as native speaker were taken for non-native speakers by their students, according to Moussu's (2006). In 2007, Park analysed how speakers constructed their non-native speaker identities through interaction. In the same year, Faez confirmed Park's study. He argued that people's language identities are complicated and changeable, which depend on relationships, dialogue, and context. These studies show that it is inaccurate to use the native English speaker and non-native English speaker dichotomy which consider these two groups as opposing and clearly separated categories.

Lucie Moussu and Enric Llurda made three arguments against such dichotomy. First, everyone who uses a particular language is in fact born to that language, and thus he or she is a native speaker of the language (Nayar 1994). For this reason, we cannot simply put speakers into different groups according to whether they have a native speaker quality or not, based on whether English is their mother tongue or not. Secondly, from the point of view of World Englishes, the English language have evolved into indigenised varieties of English around the world. Speakers of English in such countries as Kenya, non-Anglophone South Africa, India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Tanzania, the Philippines, Nigeria, Bangladesh and others, where English is spoken as a second language, cannot be excluded as non-native speakers of English simply because they do not speak as people in the Inner Circle do. Thirdly, such dichotomy is flawed because it lacks contexts and because it fails to consider that language teaching and the local context where the teaching is conducted depend on each other. It is claimed that there is a continuum where we can find all possible cases between the two extremes, with individuals standing on any given point along this continuum.

5. Native and non-native speakers in ELT

Now that we have a clearer understanding of how to distinguish native English speakers and non-native English speakers. Then what does this mean for the ELT profession? What role does it plays in determining the teaching practice of EFL teachers? Do native English speakers necessarily make better English teachers than non-native English speakers? Once we accept the native/non-

native dichotomy, we need to face the question: who make better teachers, the native English speaker teachers (NEST) or the non-native English speaker teachers (NNEST)?

It is definite that native speakers should be the model for language teaching. And we see a number of job advertisements for EFL teachers that recruit native English speakers only:

London:

“Qualified, native speaking English teachers offered (a centre in Northfields)”

China:

“Are you a native English speaker or ‘near native’? (University of Southampton)”

Korea:

“Must be native speaker and UK, Ire, NZ, Can, Aus, SA citizen’ (English Teacher Direct)”

Ecuador:

“Wall Street Institute Ambato is looking for Native Speakers (no experience needed)”

I personally have encountered many similar situations in the schools that I worked for when they recruited foreign teachers in China. For instance, the presidents of Changchun Public Relations School and Chengdu Neusoft University made very explicit that they recruited white native English speakers from United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand only. They made status of being native speaker from these countries the only criteria for recruitment but neglected other important criteria for a good language teacher, such as education background in language education and teaching experience.

Does being native speaker that important? Aside from the racial prejudice of the Chinese school presidents, they only cared about the business and neglected professional considerations. It is understandable to some extent because students in China were full of curiosity for foreigners and they had few opportunities to be taught by foreigner teachers. Simply seeing foreigners in their classroom could excite them. As a result, Changchun Public Relations School recruited an older Canadian teacher who just retired from a college and a younger Canadian postgraduate student who was traveling on holiday in China, and who did not have much previous teaching experience. As the interpreter and teaching assistant for the foreign teachers, I observed their classroom teaching from the beginning to the end. The gap between them showed up when they had taught students for a longer period and the students’ excitement cooled down. It was apparent that the qualified older teacher could impart his teaching content efficiently and interact with students effectively, while in the younger inexperienced Canadian’s class, the students often got confused what the teacher wanted them to do. Because of ineffective communication, students often fell asleep. Later I interviewed the students who they preferred, the younger foreign teacher, the older foreign teacher, or their Chinese English teacher? And they put them in this order: the older foreign teacher, the Chinese English teacher, and the younger foreign teacher.

Their answer kind of surprised me as I did not expect they put a Chinese English teacher before a native English speaker teacher. It made me think why? Does a native English speaker who speaks the language more proficiently can teach the language more effectively? Regardless of students’ preference for foreigners out of their curiosity, how should we weigh NEST and NNEST

professionally?

Now, I would like to talk about these questions in native/non-native dimension based on Péter Medgyes' work.

If we assess an English teacher only by language competence, any NEST, whether or not they possess EFL qualifications, can make more effective teachers than any NNEST. However, as the way we use English in everyday life is different from how we conduct English teaching in a classroom, there are other teaching skills in terms of charisma, motivation, sex, aptitude, experience, age, training, and so on. They can be used to assess NESTS and NNESTS in equal terms. Suppose NESTS and NNESTS are equal in all these variables, can we make the conclusion that natives would overtake their non-native counterparts because of latter's deficient English language competence? My answer is no. It is exactly their deficiency in English that gives them the advantage over NESTS to be better English teacher. Why is it that one's weakness becomes one's strength? I would like to give the following reasons.

- 1) NNESTS can serve as successful models of the learners of English that non-native students can imitate. However proficiently NESTS use the language, they can only act as language model instead of learner model, because they do not learn English the way NNESTS do.
- 2) NNESTS possess more effective learning strategies. Unlike the native speakers who simply acquired the language in the childhood L1 acquisition, non-natives have used language learning strategies while they are constantly learning the language and understand better how to use these strategies than the non-natives.
- 3) NNESTS can give learners more information about the L2. During the process from beginners of English to accomplished English users, NNESTS have accumulated plenty of knowledge about the English language and gained insight into how the language works, which they can share with their students.
- 4) NNESTS understand better what language difficulties English learners might encounter. Growing with experience, this anticipatory skill allows them to help learners overcome language difficulties and to cross barricade.
- 5) Sharing the learners' native language benefits NNESTS. It is the NNESTS's advantage to use the native language effectively as a means of giving instructions and getting feedbacks in the classroom, which can assist both the teacher in his/her teaching and the students in their learning process in numerous ways, particularly in a monolingual setting.
- 6) NNESTS incline to show more understanding to the needs and problems of their students. Since they are always in the process of learning English, they can anticipate similar difficulties encountered by the learners. Therefore, this constant battle with learning English makes non-natives more sensitive, understanding, and empathetic.

To sum up, these advantages possessed exclusively by NNESTS over the NESTS can offset their deficiency of language competence. In this sense, it is a false statement that “the more proficient in English, the more efficient in the classroom.” In teaching practice, the ways adopted by NNESTS and NESTS can be different to a large extent; both groups can make full use of their own advantages.

6. What is the students’ expectation?

As I have analysed based on research, both the NNESTS and the NESTS have their own advantages and disadvantages. Do the ESL students perceive their native and non-native English language teachers the same way? Some research projects have already been carried out to investigate this issue.

Moussu’s (2002) surveyed 97 ESL students at a US university to test a hypothesis that students hold negative attitude towards their NNESTS at first, but their attitude may turn positive after they have been taught by NNESTS for a period of time. The results showed that students liked their NNESTS more and more during a semester of study.

Liang (2002), in his MA project at a California State University, Los Angeles, researched students’ opinions of the accent of 6 ESL teachers. Although the 6 teachers spoke with various native and non-native English accents, they did not seem to cause the negative opinion of the students. Instead, the students cared more about some personal qualities, such as humorous character and patience, and professional qualities such as being responsible, qualified and professional.

Mahboob (2003) in his PhD project asked students for their opinions about their teachers with open-ended questions. The students answers covered almost all the strengths and weaknesses of their NNESTS and the NESTS. Here is chart to show them.

	positive comments	negative comments
NNESTS	experiences as ESL learners, their knowledge of grammar, stricter methodology, hard work, ability to answer questions, and literacy skills	poorer oral skills and lack of knowledge about the ‘English-speaking’ culture.
NESTS	oral skills, large vocabulary, and cultural knowledge	poor knowledge of grammar, their lack of experience as ESL learners, difficulties in answering questions, and teaching methodology

In 2002, Kelch & Santana-Williamson conducted a research project which discovered that students can accurately distinguish native and non-native English speakers’ accents in only 45% of the situations. When they could tell the teachers’ native accent, they tend to show a strong positive attitude towards them. Apart from that, the students mentioned other qualities of both NNESTS and NESTS. Here is chart to show them.

	comments
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NNESTS	role models, source of motivation, and language learners who understood students' learning difficulties
NESTS	likeable, educated, experienced, overall better teachers, especially for speaking/listening skills.

In 2002, Cheung conducted research which aimed to discover the university students' attitudes and opinions towards NSs and NNSs in Hong Kong, the advantages and disadvantages of the teachers perceived by their students. The following chart can give us a clear picture of the results.

	Language skills	professional skills (more essential)
NNESTS	ability to empathize with students, a shared cultural background, and their stricter expectations	knowledge of their subject, preparation, being able to make lessons interesting and fun and to motivate students, etc.
NESTS	language proficiency and fluency, as well as cultural knowledge,	

Another study by Barratt & Kontra (2000) aimed to find out the opinions of one group of students in Hungary and another in China, who also provided their both positive and negative opinions about their NESTS. We can see them from the following chart.

	positive comments	negative comments
NESTS	language authenticity, knowledge of culture, positive and humorous personalities, a more relaxed attitude toward error correction, and the use of new teaching methodologies	lack of pedagogical and professional preparation, poor teaching styles, lack of organization and preparation, poor knowledge of the local culture and educational values, problems with different English accents, and poor understanding of students' learning difficulties.

Based on these studies, we can see that not all students think negatively about their ESL/EFL non-native English teachers basically, and think that as a language teacher, experience and professionalism are more important than whether or not they speak English as the native language.

7. What is the ideal teacher?

So far, it seems that both NNESTS and NESTS have their strengths and weaknesses. And there are considerable amount of discrepancies between these two groups of teachers in their teaching practice. As I have indicated, these differences all result from their different language backgrounds. Nevertheless, we cannot judge if one is an effective teacher or not simply by whether he or she is a native or non-native English speaker. Neither of the two groups are 'the perfect teacher'. The ideal

teacher should be one who can compensate his/her weakness to a large degree. Therefore, “the NEST can be an ideal teacher if he or she has achieved a high degree of proficiency in the learners’ native language; the NNEST can make an ideal teacher if he or she has achieved near-native proficiency in English.” Although both groups of teachers come from different backgrounds, they eventually stand very close to one another.

However close, I would argue that they will never fill the gap between each other. Nor will there be a need to do so. Both NNESTS and NESTS serve different purposes that are equally useful. An ideal school is the one that achieve a balance between NESTS and non-NESTS, who make up for one another in their advantages and disadvantages. If they can be combined rationally, they can collaborate with each other in various forms both in and outside the classroom. We should address the limitations and potentials of the two groups of teachers and discover ways how they could make progress within their own limitations.

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