



June 2006

Volume 10, Number 1

Contents | [TESL-EJ Top](#)*** Forum *****Native Or Non-Native -- Can We Still Wonder Who Is Better?**

In a recent search in the ERIC Database, I found roughly 1,500 papers related to the issue of a teacher's national origin. Despite this huge amount of information, numerous essays, opinion papers, and so on, it seems that there is not any way to agree about who is the better teacher. When preparing this column, I had the opportunity to speak to a TESL-EJ fan, Nick Kearney, who is the Director at the Center of Languages at Florida University College in Valencia, Spain. He mentioned a number of cases in which he had to hire native English speaking teachers (even qualified teachers) whose results were poor. We also spoke about writing and journals for a while and agreed that most Spanish institutions have N and NN teachers who do an excellent job every day.

This Forum is about the issues that often go unnoticed, and still have a great impact on learners and teachers. For this Forum, I have had the great pleasure of working with people of five different nationalities. Ana Wu has a descriptive approach to the topic with valuable references that will surely challenge our readers. After that, Zoltán Dörnyei offers a picture of a Native (Hungarian) speaker in England. The third, and longer piece is by Robin Walker, the vice-president of TESOL Spain, whose conclusion is that it is time to close this longstanding matter. Additionally, this Forum includes the opinions and work of Camino Bueno (U. Pública Navarra), who is concerned about the current state of under-qualified English instructors in Spain, and Marlene Baeriswyl who provides interesting ideas for content EFL classes in Switzerland.

Call for Opinions

In the next issue, this column will address classroom management and the key issues that affect ESL / EFL daily teaching. This section is open to all those who have or want to express their thoughts. In September, there will be two longer essays (about 700 words) and hope to have some shorter writings (up to 300). It would be great to hear from different places all over the world (like in this very same issue). If you want to be heard, please write one 300-word essay (and, whenever possible, include ideas to cope with your problems) and send it the Forum editor. The TESL world is looking forward to sharing ideas and experiences that, quite often, are unique to each individual but similar across the world. In one word, we look forward to hearing from you.

Being a non-native speaker, I would like to thank the following people for their language and ideas feedback for this section Colin Elton Custard (Mangold Institute, Gandía, Spain), Thomas Speering (U. Politécnica de Valencia) and Luis G. Bejarano (Valdosta State University).

Dr. Jesús García Laborda
Editor, TESL-EJ Forum
Universidad Politécnica de Valencia
<jgarcial@upvnet.upv.es>

The Nonnative English Speaking Teachers' Movement - How Far Have We Gone?

Ana Wu
San Francisco, California, USA
City College of San Francisco
<http://www.ccsf.edu/awu>

* (This anecdote first appeared in October 2005, at <http://www.moussu.net/nnest/blog>)

I am a Taiwanese Brazilian who was taught English as a foreign language by Brazilian teachers from middle to high school. In the 90's, with a bachelor degree in Chemistry and a certificate of English proficiency, I was working in a language school in Tokyo where each class had at most 5 students (We specialized in providing one-to-one classes). When new students wanted to have English conversation classes, the coordinator would give those students to a native English speaking instructor (NEST). If a student needed to prepare for a TOEFL test, the Japanese national university entrance exam, or needed to improve his/her writing skills in order to succeed in an American university, the coordinator would assign that student to me.

One time when I was in the teacher room preparing my lessons, I heard two NESTs laughing. One said, "Here is someone who actually prepares her lessons. All I do is get a newspaper and discuss an article. Next week, we will talk about Thanksgiving recipes and dinner ideas." I was very offended and hurt; however, I didn't feel less than any of them because I knew as a fact that a few of the NS instructors only had a high school diploma and that none of them had a degree in language. In my heart, I believed that some of them were not educators, but mere entertainers.

About ten years has passed since that event happened. The teaching English industry in Japan has changed. Unlike in the bubble era when a NEST could be paid ¥10,000/hour (about \$ 80 today) to teach English conversation, Japanese schools are now looking for instructors with experience and professional qualifications.

In the field of TESOL, native and nonnative teacher issues have become a legitimate area of research (Braine, 2004), and more professionals are writing articles and giving

workshops on non-native English speaking teacher (NNEST) issues, acknowledging the fact that NNESTs is not just a group of people; it's a movement (Matsuda, 2002). The merits of native and non-native English teachers (Medgyes, 1999; Matsuda & Matsuda, 2001; Liang, 2005) and the students' attitudes and preferences (Braine, 2004; Mahboob, 2004) have been extensively discussed. Organizations such as TESOL and CATESOL have representative NNEST caucus or interest group, and some graduate-level TESOL programs in American universities have begun to include issues of interest to NNESTs in the curriculum because in the past few years, the country has been receiving a large influx of NNESTs (Matsuda & Matsuda, 2001). Also, while cases of employment discrimination practices have been found (Lippi-Green, 1997), articles discussing hiring NNESTs and issues of professionalism have also been published (Flynn & Gulikers, 2001; Pasternak & Bailey, 2004).

When I reflect on my teaching experience in Japan, I am extremely thankful to my coordinator for giving me the most challenging students and for believing that I would deliver a good job. Because of these students, I have intensive experience answering grammar questions and dealing with people under pressure. Now as a teacher, I like to tell this story to my ESL students to show that we all have strengths and limitations, and that the best attitude is to keep faith in ourselves and use each challenge as a stepping stone for improvement and success.

I am also very excited to be part of this era when more administrators, peers and students are viewing NNESTs as educators by virtue of the professionalism, strengths and accomplishments, and when more NNESTs are being recognized by their area of research and expertise. Matsuda (2002) was right: NNESTs is not a just a group of people; it's a movement.

References

- Braine, G. (2004). The nonnative English-speaking professionals' movement and its research foundations. In Kamhi-Stein, L.D. (Ed.) *Learning and Teaching from Experience: Perspectives on Nonnative English Speaking Professionals* (pp. 9-24). Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Flynn, K., & Gulikers, G. (2001). Issues in hiring NNES professionals to teach ESL. *CATESOL Journal*, 13(1), 151-160.
- Liang, J. (2005). Second language competence: native speaker competence or user competence? *NNEST Newsletter*, 7(2).
- Lippi-Green, R. (1997). *English with an accent. Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States*. New York: Routledge.
- Mahboob, A. (2004). Native or nonnative: What do the students think? In Kamhi-Stein, L.D. (ed.) *Learning and Teaching from Experience: Perspectives on Nonnative English-*

Speaking Professionals (pp. 121 - 147). University of Michigan Press.

Medgyes, P. (1992). Native or nonnative: Who's worth more? *ELT Journal*. 46(4), 340-349.

Matsuda, A., & Matsuda, P. K. (2001). Autonomy and collaboration in NES/NNES teacher education. *CATESOL Journal*, 13(1), 109-121

Matsuda, P. K. (2002). Keeping the NNEST movement alive. *NNEST Newsletter*, 4(2).

Pasternak, M., & Bailey, K. (2004). Preparing nonnative and native English-speaking teachers: Issues of professionalism and proficiency. In Kamhi-Stein, L.D. (ed.) *Learning and Teaching from Experience: Perspectives on Nonnative English-Speaking Professionals* (pp. 155-175). University of Michigan Press.

Non-native Speakers Exist!

Zoltán Dörnyei

<zoltan.dornyei@nottingham.ac.uk>

University of Nottingham, UK

I was pleased to be invited to write a short essay of my personal experience of being a non-native speaker (NNS), because this is a topic I have thought about a lot over the past decades. Although I am, naturally, a native speaker (NS) of a language (Hungarian), because of being married to a British woman, living and working in the UK and having done most of my teaching and writing in the past in English, I can truly say that being a NNS is an integral part of my identity. In short, I am a NNS.

In the past, I have read with great interest all the accounts of why I (as a NNS) do not exist. Although many of these discussions raised hugely important questions about the nature of language proficiency and identity, there is one problem with them: I do exist. Because I probably write more and better in academic English than most NSs, some people might say that I am a NS in this respect, but I am not - I am keenly aware all the time that I am working in a second language. Even more interestingly, I find it very difficult to write academic texts in my mother tongue, and still I can sense a qualitative difference between producing polished L2 writing and some clumsy L1 work: When I write in the second language I know and feel that I am doing a good job as a NNS, whereas in any L1 work I know and feel that I am doing a bad job as a NS. There is no mistaking between the two.

There is one area in my life where I can almost say that I am a NS of English: baby-related language. We have two children and I have learnt all the specific language related to nappies and cots and the like in English and I do not even know the special baby-care register in my L1. This is important: In a talk a few years ago (at EuroSLA 2004

in San Sebastian), David Birdsong discussed the problematics of the 'critical period hypothesis' and highlighted the significant role that the 'residue' of the L1 plays in affecting L2 proficiency. I knew immediately that in my case this was true: I am a NNS (in English) because no matter how competently I operate in the L2, the residue of my L1 is there; L2 use is never 100% natural for me because I need to keep myself afloat over the residue. In contrast, when I submerge into this residue (i.e. start talking Hungarian), even if I cannot do my message full justice and feel frustrated, I know that I am in my elements (and not doing very well).

Let me conclude this short essay by reflecting on what my greatest difficulty in using English is. Being a Professor at an English department in the UK indicates that I am generally OK, but there are still two areas where I feel rather vulnerable. One is talking on the phone, but this might be partly psychological because I really dislike that even in my L1. The other area involves using idiomatic English. My problem is not that I do not know idioms and speak in a funny sort of 'NNS English' - no, just the opposite: I am becoming increasingly aware of the NS-like lexical phrases and conventionalised expressions, and would like to use them all the time - but sometimes I can't. This must be a real 'advanced-learner's-difficulty': Colloquial expressions come to mind in appropriate situations but I am not 100% certain about their exact form. When I am engaged in writing this is not a problem because I have enough time to think about an elusive expression or even to look it up in a dictionary and thus the final product will be good English. In L2 speech, however, I often have frustrating moments when I know how something should be said but I can't say it perfectly myself.

The conclusion for me is clear: I will never become a NS, not even after 37 years of intensive English studies. But I have come to terms with this. After all, I have a family in which we speak English, I write books and articles in English, I read the Bible and pray in English, and I have even become a professor of English, so being a NNS does not unavoidably hold us back in life. Yet, I am a NNS and I do exist!

Native or Non-native? Or the Best of Both Worlds?

Robin Walker

<walkerrobin@wanadoo.es>

Vice President, TESOL Spain

During a recent trip to Poland I put my language skills to practice deciphering adverts for language schools. This instructive exercise made it apparent that a key selling point for Polish schools was their use of native-speaker teachers. It makes sense. Like their counterparts the world over, these schools want the best for their clients. But is a NS teacher the best? Or could it be that in certain situations the non-native speaker teacher is equal, or even preferable?

Few people now question the idea that NNS teachers normally have a better

understanding of the grammar of English than their NS colleagues. In Spain, for example, many NNS teachers hold a degree in English Philology. This leaves them with a command of the language few NS teachers ever achieve.

Grammar aside, the real value of NNS teachers was brought home to me through a memorable paper given by at an IATEFL SIG symposium in London. Referring exclusively to pronunciation, an area where we might assume that the dominance of the NS is unquestionable, Jenkins (1999) posed a series of questions, the answers to which can be summarised as:

1. **knowledge:** In many countries NNS teachers have extensive formal knowledge of the phonology of English. In contrast, many native speakers have very limited training in this vital area of language competence.
2. **techniques:** NS teachers can be excellent models. However, a good model is not by definition a good instructor. In this respect, the NNS teacher who has successfully mastered the main features of English pronunciation is probably better equipped to instruct learners than the native speaker, who, in terms of techniques, may be restricted to being a model for students to copy.
3. **affectivity:** NNS teachers are only too aware of the difficulties in acquiring a second pronunciation, and so have greater empathy with their learners and the problems they encounter. In contrast, a NS may easily be unaware that certain sounds or techniques, (e.g. learners sticking their tongue out between their teeth), are embarrassing and/or stigmatised for the learner.
4. **intelligibility:** the NNS teacher has had first hand experience as to what is or is not intelligible to other users of English, be they L1 or L2 speakers. Such practical experience of achieving intelligibility leaves them better able to judge what constitutes effective performance than NS teachers, who will invariably judge success by comparison with (their own) NS performance.

These theoretical considerations are supported in some cases by learners' own preferences. Anecdotal evidence of learners who are as happy studying with a competent NNS teacher as with a competent NS teacher is not new. Beyond anecdote, Braine concluded recently that students "appear to be largely tolerant of the differences between their NS and NNS teacher's, even of the latter's accents" (2005, p. 282).

The bottom line in this issue, of course, is that the demand for English language teachers far outstrips the ability of countries where English is spoken as a native language to provide NS teachers, and this situation will only worsen with the globalisation of English. In short, outside those occasions in which a learner has an overpowering need to achieve full native-speaker competence in English, it is time to abandon this NS-NNS debate, and to work together to optimise the unique resources of both groups of teacher.

References

Jenkins, J. (1999). Pronunciation in teacher education for English as an International

Language. *Speak Out!*, 24: 45-48.

Braine, G. (2005). A Critical Review of the Research on Non-Native Speaker English Teachers. In C. Knutzmann & F. Intemann (eds.) *The Globalisation of English and the English Language Classroom* (pp. 275-284). Tübingen, Germany: Gunter Nar Verlag.

"Native English Teacher Required"

Dr. Camino Bueno
<camino.bueno@unavarra.es>
Universidad Pública de Navarra, Spain

"Native English teacher required" is the most common ad in any paper asking for teachers for private schools of languages in Spain. Surprisingly enough, there are very few native teachers in state institutions, mainly because the great majority lack the proper training to become teachers. Why is it then that they are considered the very best and not only in Spain but all over the world? I do not know of any piece of research that has shown that they are better teachers; however, the long-held belief that they are better is still there with no proof whatsoever to support such theory. The worst is that we are not usually comparing two teachers with the same qualifications, training and experience, but a qualified, well-trained and experienced teacher and an unqualified, untrained (or trained in three months) and without any experience teacher who happens to have English as his or her native language. Is no one going to try to demonstrate whose students' results are better?

Bilingual Teaching Is When You Learn without Noticing It

Marlene Baeriswyl
<bae@bluewin.ch>
Technical College of Zurich (TBZ)

At the Technical College of Zurich (TBZ), three teachers teach the subject "General Education" bilingually, with German being the first and English the target language. The topics dealt with in this subject range from cultural and environmental issues to social studies and politics. I have taught bilingually at our school for three years.

Generally speaking, I find it a very rewarding experience and the students seem to enjoy and profit from it as well. However, there are a number of questions we are still struggling with. For instance, how should we evaluate and grade students' contributions in English? To what extent should we focus on just the content and disregard language mistakes?

Another issue lies in the teaching material. So far, no course books for teaching General

Education bilingually have been published. Therefore, we all have to rely on our imagination as well as on what the media offer in order to prepare our lessons. Furthermore, it is difficult to estimate what the general gains and losses of bilingual teaching are. On the plus side, students are exposed to the target language more frequently. Yet on the minus side, don't you lose something when discussing a particular topic in a foreign language?

In my opinion, bilingual teaching is well worth the trouble, because our students need to be able to get involved, express themselves and take a stand in our global society.

© Copyright rests with authors. Please cite TESL-EJ appropriately.

Editor's Note: The HTML version contains no page numbers. Please use the PDF version of this article for citations.