

NATIVE VS. NON-NATIVE TEACHERS: A MATTER TO THINK OVER

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RESUMEN

Este trabajo se centra en el tema, tan debatido, de las diferencias entre los profesores de lengua extranjera nativos y no nativos, en particular los profesores de inglés. Después de hacer una revisión bibliográfica sobre los trabajos de investigación sobre el tema, analizamos la percepción de profesores y alumnos en cuanto a la influencia del profesorado nativo y no nativo en el aula de idiomas. También, partiendo de nuestra experiencia como profesor en una Facultad de Traducción en España, exponemos nuestras impresiones y vivencias al respecto.

PALABRAS CLAVE: profesores nativos, profesores no nativos, diferencias, percepciones de profesores y alumnos.

ABSTRACT

«Native vs. Non-Native Teachers: A Matter to Think Over». The present paper focuses on the much debated issue of native and non-native speakers as teachers of foreign languages, and particularly English. After offering a brief literature review of the research on the differences between native and non-native teachers, we shall get a deeper insight into student and teacher perceptions of the influence of native and non-native teachers on the foreign language classroom. We shall also express our thoughts and feelings about the subject, and expose our experience as a teacher in a Translation Faculty in Spain.

KEY WORDS: native teachers, non-native teachers, differences, student and teacher perceptions.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article is aimed at reopening a debate on growing concern among non-native ESL/EFL teachers. To this day the issue of the native and non-native English teacher is practically, like a badly-kept secret, a taboo subject in ESL/ELT. For the sake of political correctness and to let sleeping dogs lie —passions run high when an issue involves questions of personal and cultural identity, vocation, status, equal rights and job opportunities— educational institutions will state that both sides complement each other and can coexist in peace and harmony. Our intention here is obviously not to take sides, but to point out some of the pros and cons of having either a native or non-native as a teacher, and to try to reach some possible conclusions.



For the purpose of this article, I will be referring to English as the target language (L2) and to the student's own language as the mother tongue (L1). Similarly, in mentioning a native teacher, I mean a native speaker of English, in contrast to a non-native teacher, who has learnt English in a non-English speaking country or/and during home stays abroad.

In this article, I have attempted to express some thoughts and feelings about a subject that deserves looking into more deeply among native and non-native teachers alike. After sharing our thoughts with teachers of both kinds lecturing at the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain, I have gained greater insight into the problem, in an atmosphere of mutual respect, goodwill and with open minds.

2. THEORETICAL APPROACH

The debate was opened a long time ago, starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the communicative approach was put at the heart of language teaching and learning (Searle, 1969; Hymes, 1972; Halliday, 1975), but it came to a peak in the 1990s when having native teachers in schools and university became a guarantee of quality. In 1991 Alan Davies, professor emeritus at the University of Edinburgh, considered this issue from varied linguistic angles, presenting many models of what being a native speaker might imply and explaining the major weaknesses of non-native speakers: these consist in using forms which do not exist and making socio-linguistic errors when using some terms, for example idiomatic slang. Davies concludes this work by suggesting:

The debate about the native speaker will go on. In that debate it will continue to be necessary to distinguish between the two senses of native speaker, the flesh and blood and the ideal; and if others choose to dismiss, as I have, the flesh and blood of the native speaker as having no clothes, I believe they still have use for the ideal. That indeed is a myth but a useful myth. (p. 167)

Three years later, in 1994, Peter Medgyes, a reader at Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest and native speaker of Hungarian, published *The Non-Native Teacher*, a book relating the native/non-native speaker theme to the students and teachers of foreign languages. This excellent and thought-provoking book as well as a brilliant article written two years later (Medgyes, 1996: 31-42) are sound reflections on the results of his research into the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 English-speaking teachers and should be compulsory reading for all foreign languages teachers. His conclusions are as follows: (1) native and non-native teachers generally differ in language proficiency; (2) they also tend to differ in terms of teaching behaviours; (3) item one accounts for most of the differences in item two; (4) both can be equally good teachers. Medgyes comments that native teachers tend to be less textbook-dependent and usually more tolerant of student errors, whereas non-native teachers are often able to provide better role models, teach



learning strategies more effectively, supply learners with more explicit information than the formers. But he also recognises that these teachers have difficult roles, as they are «at junction between two languages and several cultures» (Medgyes: 1994, 39), resulting in difficulty to separate their L1 and L2 identities.

These two major works should be compulsory reading for all language teachers, as they reflect the controversy and hearty polemic involved in the native /non-native speaking teacher debate and hint at the way discrimination may pervade the workplace in a global world where cultures and languages are constantly being in contact.

Indeed, I think that at the eve of the 21st century the debate should be approached from a different angle: that of globalization. Our planet is no longer made of countries that Thanks to or because of globalization, English has been turned into a global lingua franca and has also been made more accessible to people all over the world. It was not only adopted in the 20th century as an official or semi-official language in over 60 countries in every continent and in three major oceans—Atlantic, Indian and Pacific; but it also has status as a second or foreign language all over the world—. It is even used simultaneously as a first and second language in some countries like Canada. As a matter of fact, contacts between cultures and all kinds of interests have made it easier to learn English than before and it is now almost imperative to know some English.

Although English is not the language with the greatest number of native speakers world-wide, its importance for communication is constantly growing. Crystal simply characterises a global language as follows: «A language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country» (Crystal, 1997: 2).

He then goes on to mention some of the fields of dominance for English such as the media, foreign language teaching, business, etc., which he had already stipulated two years earlier in *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language*. According to David Crystal these are the six major reasons for people to choose English as a second language (1995: 106): (1) Historical reasons as a result of the legacy of British and American imperialism; (2) Internal political reasons, English sometimes having a role in providing a neutral means of communication between the different ethnic groups of a country; (3) External economic reasons, for international business and trade; (4) Practical reasons, English being the language of international air traffic control, emergency services, international tourism, etc.; (5) Intellectual reasons, most of the scientific, technological and academic information in the world being expressed in English; (6) Entertainment reasons, whether we are talking about popular music, advertising, video games, movies or the Internet, for example.

This globalization of the English language has tremendously affected the teaching of English as a foreign language and has contributed to the increase in students' and institutions' preference for native teachers of English over non-native teachers. Especially in countries where the level of English at the end of secondary education is considered poor or insufficient, having native teachers in the classroom is seen as the only solution to improve the student's communicative skills and prepare them for their future work in this new global world. As a result, in those



countries which can afford native teachers, non-native teachers have too often been relegated to teaching grammar or translation using their students' native language.

The general situation is paradoxical, though. Canagarajah (1999) states that 80% of the world's English language teachers are non-native teachers. The number of people worldwide learning English is steadily increasing, to the point where Kachru (1996) estimates there are four non-native English speakers for each native English speaker, a proportion similar to that of teachers of English. Non-native speakers of English are and will continue to be in the majority (Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999). Despite these ratios, many still consider that foreign languages should be taught by native speakers of the language. Phillipson (1992a) labels this the «native speaker fallacy.» It is then high time we all realized that, with English being the international Lingua Franca and the total amount of non-native speakers and learners outnumbering the amount of native speakers, a new form of «international English» should be let to appear and become a patrimony of all humanity, the pressure not being the drive for identity, but rather the drive for international intelligibility. Indeed, who speaks better English: Queen Elizabeth II, Georges W. Bush, John Howard (Australia), Mary McAleese (Ireland), A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (India), Kofi Annan (UN), Javier Solana (EU). Some are native speakers of English, others not, but all seven can be perfectly understood at world level, can't they?

3. FOOD FOR THOUGHTS

Being a French native speaker myself and after teaching French in the United Kingdom (as a native teacher) and English in France and Spain (as a non-native teacher) for more than ten years, experience has led me to believe that non-native teachers of English or any other foreign languages are generally accomplished second language learners and, as such, should be at the centre of foreign languages education and not on the sideline, especially because they have the advantage of being able to look into their own learning strategies and to find the way to use those strategies in their teaching.

Coming back to ESL/EFL teaching, it is a fact that in many non-English speaking countries, where the level of the foreign language reached at the end of compulsory education is sometimes rather poor, native teachers seem to be appreciated and considered to be the saviours of the flaws of the educational system. From the point of view of the learners, having a native teacher means practising conversation with a native speaker, learning slang and colloquial vocabulary, helping with special usages and tricky pronunciation problems.

We, the non-natives, are at disadvantage because of this latest «native teacher» frenzy. Everyone seems to be looking for a «native speaker» these days. In some countries, and especially in some private institutions, there are no teacher evaluation practices of any kind, as if being native was considered to be a qualification by itself, hence a feeling of disappointment among some highly qualified and motivated non-native teachers who are sometimes turned away when seeking employment.

To be sure, native speakers have a few obvious advantages over non-native teachers. Native teachers know the language very well, having used it their entire lives. They can give the students insights into the culture which a non-native would find difficult to provide, and they know things about their language, which a non-native teacher might find impossible to learn. For instance, they can point out dialectal variations, which a non-native teacher of English might totally ignore. In general native teachers can provide a model for acquisition of the sound system, providing their students with an excellent role model in terms of pronunciation and helping them build up their confidence in using language for communication. However, unlike L1 learners, L2 learners unless they are very young, cannot create the grammar of English on their own from the input from native speakers particularly with very limited exposure and limited contexts. The preference for native teachers over non-native teachers may be due to the misconception that input from native speakers can make learning English as effortless as the learning the first language. In this context, native speakers have disadvantages. As a matter of fact, it is often difficult for a native teacher to sympathize with some aspects of language learning which students find challenging.

Especially if s/he is an experienced teacher with a broad knowledge of both English and the student's mother tongue, the non-native teacher has the advantage of being able to make comparisons between the grammar of English and the grammar of the mother tongue in order to help students overcome difficulties in understanding and/or producing new structures. Non-natives, indeed, tend to have far better language analysis than natives. They know what caused them problems learning the language, and can apply that experience to their own lessons. Furthermore, having to juggle two roles and identities at the same time—that of a learner and that of a teacher—non-native teachers are led to observing and reflecting, which in turn leads to further awareness and a reflective cycle in one's linguistic and cultural competence. It is a fact of critical importance for their careers, and obviously a level of linguistic competence is for many teachers one of the most important sources of their professional credibility and the bedrock of their professional competence.

Aspiring to linguistic competence in a foreign language also means aspiring to sociocultural competence. If language is a reflection of the culture that uses it, then learning a language is inseparable from learning alternatives to our native systems of values and codes of behaviour. Indeed, although helping students acquire the grammar and lexis of the target language is obviously important, it is equally important to encourage students' interest in the culture(s) of L2. Here, the native teacher has a definite advantage. Still, many cultural aspects might be taken for granted by a native teacher and, therefore, might not be treated relevantly. Thus, a non-native teacher with a rich L2 culture knowledge would serve the same purpose just as well. As a matter of fact, non-native teachers may understand and appreciate better both their own and the other cultural identities which are bound to be enriched by experience. I definitely believe that a teacher's credibility relies on «the ability to acquire another person's language and understand someone else's culture while retaining one's own [that] is one aspect of a more general ability to



mediate between several languages and cultures, called cross-cultural, intercultural or multicultural communication» (Kramsch, 1998).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Bearing such a premise in mind, a blend of native and non-natives is probably ideal. If students are exposed to both kinds of teachers, and especially if the teachers cooperate and learn from each other, optimal results will follow.

Second year students at the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting of the University of Las Palmas (Canary Islands, Spain) have English as an annual core subject taught for four hours a week timetable into two sittings: one of two hours with a native teacher (British) and another one of two hours with a non-native teacher. The main linguistic and cultural focus of the programme centres on British life and customs although comparison are frequently drawn between Britain and America so as to make students aware of the differences in language, society culture, institutions, etc. The presence of two teachers has been welcomed by the students as a way of improving their cultural and linguistic skills and knowledge of the English language through direct insight into the British culture and continuous comparison with their mother tongue, thus gradually developing the skills needed to become competent translators.

Having native teachers and non-native teachers working together is definitely ideal and many language teaching organisations nowadays opt for this team-teaching approach, in which a native and a non-native speaking teacher share the same class, but the role of non-native teachers should not be limited to teaching grammar particularly the teaching of grammar for a grammar test, not for its application in reading or writing. It is the strategies that accomplished second learners of English use in learning forms, applying their knowledge of forms in their production and in improving their fluency and ability to communicate that should be the focus of English education. To that purpose, the knowledge of a native speaker and the knowledge of the students' language and culture need to be combined to achieve effective teaching of foreign languages.

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