Is the ‘native speaker/ non-native speaker’ teacher dichotomy really necessary anymore?

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I’ll start by saying great English teachers are great English teachers, regardless of their mother tongue.

The short answer to this month’s blog topic, “is it really worth making the distinction between ‘native English speakers’ (NES) and ‘non-native English speakers’ (NNES)”, is no; the issue, however, is much more complex than a simple one-word response. Undoubtedly, the English language continues to occupy a predominant role in the world, serving as the language of access to important pools of knowledge for many developing countries. They utilize this knowledge in order to empower their citizens and advance their countries forward. Thus, the English language’s global status as a “gatekeeper” to prosperity and advancement continues to remain prominent, and it is the driving engine behind the English language teaching (ELT) industry. As a result, the demand for English language teachers remains high as schools, universities, and businesses around the world scramble to find competent and effective language instructors for their programs. However, as it regards the issue of employment in ELT, there has always been a contentious discussion about who should be employed to teach English; should the person be ‘native’? ‘non-native’? Does it really matter?

A quick search on any major ESL/EFL recruiting website will reveal that many recruiters put a premium on 'native-speakers' of English as preferred candidates (and explicitly state as such!). This is due to a number of reasons. Many recruiters feel that 1) 'NNES' can't relate to or represent the "culture" of native-speaking countries (i.e. the UK, US, etc.), which is an important part of language learning, 2) only 'NES' know best how to teach the language, and 3) many students prefer to learn from 'NES' rather than 'NNES'. This short post will hope to address the role of culture in ELT, the usefulness of distinguishing between two types of teachers, and this dichotomy's relevance in language teaching.

English speaking "culture" for a truly global language

For many countries, their language is intimately attached to the culture and trying to learn a language in isolation from its culture is next to impossible. Take Japanese, for example. Learning the etiquette of politeness and the hierarchical structure in their society are both important metalinguistic parts of the language that are crucial to one's successful navigation within Japan. Added to this, the only real opportunity one would get to use Japanese on a consistent basis would be in Japan, the main place where Japanese is spoken, so knowing this cultural information is extremely valuable. English, on the other hand, occupies a very different space. According to Lyons (2017), there are 1.5 billion English language speakers in the world, which accounts for approximately 20% of the entire human race! This means that the English language has truly become a world language used by many different types of people, and it is no longer a language confined to a particular geographical region. Smith (1976) argued that as a language grows in its user base, expanding far beyond its own national borders, it becomes denationalized and loses some of the attachment to its original culture. This is especially true when the language serves a mostly instrumental purpose as English does in many learning contexts around the world. From this line of logic, it isn't necessary for a 'NNES' teacher to necessarily be familiar with the customs of any particular English-speaking country in order to teach English successfully, nor is it necessary for students to acquire such metalinguistic cultural aids if the students will most likely not travel to an English-speaking country. So, any argument that states "because 'NNES' are not from the "culture" of the English language, they are not as effective in teaching English as 'NES'" has little to stand on.

'Native-speakers' know best how to teach English

Another common misconception that is perpetuated by discussing English teachers within a 'native/non-native' framework is that 'NES' are better teachers just by virtue of being 'NES'. As a concept, this notion was dispelled almost three decades ago by Philipson (1992) who stated that simply knowing how to speak a language doesn't automatically guarantee that one would be an expert teacher of it. Speaking a language and teaching it are two completely different phenomena: the former involving acquisition through listening and communication, the latter involving

explicitly studying theories of how students learn and studying effective methods to deliver lesson content. One could presumably be a great speaker of English and a terrible English teacher in class! So again, maintaining this distinction between 'NES' and 'NNES' is futile when it comes to determining who is a good teacher in the classroom. A good teacher is a good teacher regardless if his/her mother tongue is English, and in my career, I have worked with some outstanding English teachers whose first language wasn't English. It was their teaching style, knowledge of effective methodology and rapport with the students that made them qualified: not them being 'native' or 'non-native'. As this issue gains more prominence in our field, I invite you to further research what Marek Kiczkowiak (over at TEFL Equity Advocates) has been doing to dispel the many myths surrounding 'NNES' in ELT.

Students prefer 'native-speaker' teachers

There is also the unfortunate assumption that students prefer 'NES' teachers above 'NNES' teachers. In addition to thinking that 'NNES' teachers are not as qualified (an argument we've just addressed), it is also claimed that 'NNES' teachers have accents which make it difficult for students to learn the language; thus, a 'native speaker' of the language is ideal for employment. Firstly, a number of studies have been carried out examining student preferences for 'NES' or 'NNES' teachers and none of them conclude that students prefer one to the other; in fact, studies show that students recognize and value the strengths of both (Richardson, 2016). Secondly for a language that is truly global, intelligibility becomes the main concern in communicating in English, not necessarily an accent. That is to say, so long as the teacher's pronunciation is clear, so long as effective communication is taking place, then a teacher's accent (American, British, or otherwise) will have very little bearing on students acquiring the language. Lastly, another point to consider is that currently 'NNES' account for approximately 80% of the entire ELT workforce (Richardson, 2016). It is not only undesirable to prefer 'NES' over 'NNES' but it's also impractical. There are simply not enough 'NES' teachers to supply market demands if every recruiter in the world decided to hire only 'NES' due to them feeling that 'NES' were the only ones capable of teaching English.

Conclusion

It's long overdue for us to think critically about alternative terms to apply to English teachers beyond 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker', and I'll admittedly be very happy once these terms are no longer used. I'm very thankful to the TeachingEnglish team for offering this much needed topic up for discussion. We should only evaluate a teacher's suitability for a job based on the one primary thing that matters: his/ her ability to teach.

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