

## NATIVE ENGLISH TEACHERS OR NON-NATIVE TEACHERS. WHO ARE THE BEST?

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*Abstract: It is a well-known fact that the global need for English language teachers in general, and for native English teachers in particular, is increasing in the education market on a daily basis. The paper at hand reflects the motives behind this increasing demand and crystallizes the advantages and disadvantages of having a native English teacher and a non-native English teacher as the guide throughout the teaching/learning/evaluation process.*

*Keywords: teaching English, native English teacher, non-native English teacher, expertise teacher.*

### Introduction

It is a well-known fact that the demand for English language teachers is increasing nowadays in the education market. According to Braine George, historical evidence suggests that English was being taught as a second or foreign language as far back as the 15<sup>th</sup> century. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the rise of England as a maritime power and the expansion of the British Empire led to the recognition of English as an important language alongside French, Italian, and Latin, and to a growing interest in learning English [1]. Moreover, with the development of new technologies, the interest in learning the English language has grown. Consequently, learning English has been made compulsory from primary school onwards in many countries. Despite the substantial number of English teachers, many universities and schools around the world are still lacking English teaching staff. This lack of teachers is the consequence of the assumption that native English teachers can do their craft better than non-natives ones since the former are believed to have an excellent command of the language and an excellent pronunciation, and they can deal with all-level proficiency students. An English language teacher who has acquired an ELT certificate as a result of maybe three months of formal studies (or an average of 100 training hours) is sometimes, or, should I say is always given preference over the non-native English teacher who has studied the language for several years in formal academic settings, gained a master degree or even a doctoral degree in the field.

For instance, if one were to look for a job in Jordan for example, there would be many small private businesses where a native English-speaking teacher could find a job because he has either a British or an American accent. Students want to learn with native speakers because they want to learn the accent. This makes it easier for native speakers to get a job even if they do not have a degree, or even a certification in teaching English [12].

This preference of the native teachers is related to the postulation stipulating that non-native English teachers have lower vocabulary level and less command of the metaphoric or idiomatic language, and their pronunciation is influenced or affected to a certain extent by their mother tongue. Because of the aforementioned facts, the NNETs are often being discriminated against. As Jeremy Harmer says, for many years an opposition has been created between native-speaking English teachers and non-native speaking English teachers. And for much of that time, many non-native speaking teachers have felt a sense of injustice and

sometimes even inferiority at what they perceive as the assumed superiority of the native teachers [5, p.118]. Alan Davies considers that the everyday use of the term *native speaker* can cause offence. At university departments where applied linguistics are taught, linguists often use in their daily discussions the terms *native speaker* and *non-native speaker*. Such use does not tend to be exact; it is rather an appeal to common sense to use a difficult and uncertain concept which is at the same time a useful piece of shorthand. Appeals of the following kind are frequently made in academic settings in the UK:

*We need 10 native speakers for a test on Friday*  
*I am looking for three non-native speakers to help with a questionnaire*  
*What do the native speakers think about this (piece of discourse, stylistics exercise and so on).*  
*I've posted a job vacancy for native-speaking teacher on the notice-board.*

What is clear is that such shorthand requests cause a good deal of offence, states Davies Alan [3, p. 7]. This injustice arises from the fact that the NNETs are often underestimated by students and even by their colleagues who are native English speakers. While, the NETs are assumed to use English fluently and accurately in the classrooms, with an unlimited flexibility when teaching, the NNETs are assumed to be less flexible, less accurate and less fluent, relying mostly on textbooks. English language teachers have a common objective, namely teaching the English language to the speakers of other languages. As we often come across numerous job advertisements on different job-related websites, or university academic settings as I have mentioned earlier in this paper, seeking native English teachers, people in general, and non-native English teachers in particular, wonder: *Does the native teacher make the student a better learner? Is the student more motivated to learn the language when his/her teacher is a native speaker of the language? How much is a teacher supposed to speak in the classroom? How much is a student supposed to listen to the fluency, accuracy, and the metaphorical language of the native - speaking teacher? Is it possible for non-native teachers to be good English communicators, using fluent, accurate and metaphorical English? Is it possible for the non-native English teachers to be unlimited in flexibility while teaching the language? Is it possible for English teachers to work together as a team without any grade of superiority regardless of their mother tongue? Is the native English teacher better than the non-native English teacher?*

### **Defining the terms "native speaker" and "non-native speaker"**

According to Davis (2003), many scholars have attempted over many years to provide workable and rational distinction between *a native speaker* and *a non-native speaker* and many others have argued that it is impossible to provide workable and rational distinctions between these two terms [cited in 7, p. 8]. While Swales (1993) argues that it no longer makes any sense to differentiate between native and non-native speakers, Madgyes (1994, p. 27) insists that the native English speaker teacher and the non-native English speaker teacher are two different species” [cited in 7, p. 8]. However, up till now, there is currently no clear consensus on the definition of a native speaker, Sunyoung Park states. In Shin’s opinion (2008), the native/non-native division is one of the most difficult and elusive concepts to define in language teaching [cited in 9, p. 9]. The concept of *native speaker* is a central issue

in SLA research and language teaching, states Vivian Cook [2, p. 171]. The author says that one of the first uses of the term is by Leonard Bloomfield (1933, p. 43): “the first language a human being learns to speak is his native language; he’s a native speaker of this language” [cited in 2, p. 171]. According to Alan Davies the native speakers of a language are the models we appeal to for the “truth” about the language; they know what language is, and what the language isn’t. They are the stakeholders of the language; they control its maintenance and shape its direction [3, p. 10.] In Nike K. Pokorn’ opinion, the concept of “native speaker” has like the term “mother tongue”, more than one meaning. The author provides the following definitions:

1. A native speaker of L1 is someone who has native-like intuitions by virtue of nativity;
2. A native speaker is someone who acquired L1 during childhood in an L1 speaking family or environment;
3. A native speaker is someone who uses the language creatively;
4. A native speaker is someone who has the capacity to produce fluent, spontaneous discourse in English and intuitively distinguishes between correct and incorrect forms of English [11, p. 6-8];

Unfortunately, the last two definitions are not usually taken into account as the employee is mostly interested in the candidate’s nationality.

Because of the difficulties of arriving at a clear definition of the term “native speaker”, recently there has been a growing challenge to the relevance and usefulness of the term [8, p. 30]. Ramton (1990:98-9) advocates replacing the term with the concept of “expertise”. In his view this concept has the following advantages:

1. Although they often do, experts do not have to feel close to what they know about. Expertise is different from identification.
2. Expertise is learned not fixed or innate.
3. Expertise is relative One person’s expert is another person’s fool.
4. Expertise is partial. People can be expert in several fields, but they are never omniscient.
5. To achieve expertise, one goes through process of certification, in which one is judged by other people. Their standards of assessment can be reviewed and disputed [cited in 8, p. 30].

Although there is a wide agreement that the terms *native* and *non-native* speaker are impossible to define (Kaplan, 1999) and that they “obviously and pointlessly dichotomise the world neatly into “us” and “them” (Kaplan, 1999), the reality is that “teachers who are perceived as speaking a language other than English as their mother tongue - regardless of their actual proficiency with English - are typically labelled as “non-native English speakers” [6, p. 72].

In the present paper, the term *native English teachers* targets all English teachers whose mother tongue is English as well as all English teachers who acquired the English language during childhood as a result of being brought up in an English speaking country. I use the term *non-native English teachers* to refer to all English teachers whose mother tongue is other than English but who have studied the language in a formal academic environment, thus being qualified to teach English as a second or foreign language.

### **Being a Native - Speaking English Teacher.**

For many decades the English language - teaching profession has assumed that native English - speaking teachers, by virtue of their superior model of oral production, comprised the ideal English language teacher. [4, p. 137]. This assumption is related to the belief that the "native speaker" represents, in Adrian Hollyday's words (2006, p. 286), the "Western culture" from which springs the ideal of the English language and English language teaching methodology [cited in 5, p. 119]. I definitely agree with Harmer Jeremy who says that this belief is still alive and well in some quarters, not least in the minds of some students, who seem to think that being taught by someone who has English as a mother tongue will somehow help them learn better [5, p. 119]. Kachru (2005), McKay (2002) brings into light the fact that English is not frequently learned as a tool for understanding and teaching American or British cultural values. Instead, English has become a tool for international communication in transportation, commerce, banking, tourism, technology, diplomacy, and scientific research [4, p. 136]. Thus, taking into account this point of view with regard to the motives of learning the English language, I totally disagree with the idea that the NETs are better teachers as they represent the so called "Western culture" from which springs the ideal of the English language and English language teaching methodology. The practical importance of the term "native speaker" is emphasized by Paikeday (1985), who points to the employment discrimination against those who lack the 'ideal' native-speaker attributes: native speakership should not be used as a criterion for excluding certain categories of people from language teaching, dictionary editing, and similar functions" [cited in 3, p. 6].

Being a native speaker does not automatically make you a good teacher, Vivian Cook says. In many instances, continues the author, the expat native speaker is less trained than the local non-native teacher, or has been trained in an educational system with different values and goals; they are not necessarily aware of the properties of their own language and are highly unlikely to talk about its grammar coherently [2, p. 187]. Peter Medgyes (1992) highlights the drawbacks of native speakers, who:

- are not models of L2 users;
- cannot talk about L2 learning strategies from their own experience;
- are often not explicitly aware of the features of the language as much as non-native speakers are;
- cannot anticipate learning problems;
- cannot emphasize with their students learning experience;
- are not able to exploit the learners' first language in the classroom [cited in 2, p. 187].

Why are then native speakers so desirable? asks Vivian Cook [2. p. 186]. One justification often put forward is that the students themselves demand native speakers (as it has been mentioned at the beginning of the present paper). In a survey Vivian Cook conducted in several countries, children in England gave native speakers teachers a 55 per cent preference, in Belgium 33 per cent; 60 per cent of adults in England preferred natives, and in Taiwan 51 per cent. The most obvious reason for preferring native speakers is the model of language that natives can present. They can model the language their students are aiming at and can provide an instant authoritative answer to any language question [2, p. 186].

### **Being a non-native English teacher**

According to Kachru (2005), McKay (2002), English is being used as a tool for interaction among non-native speakers. Well over one-half of the one billion of the English speakers of the world learn English as a second (or foreign language). Most English language teachers across the globe (about 80%) are non-native English speakers, which means that the norm is not monolingualism, but bilingualism [cited in 4, p. 136]. Nevertheless, the non-native English teachers feel a grade of inferiority when they face the native speakers [5, p. 119, 4, p. 137]. Inferiority inevitably leads to insecurity and to lack of self-confidence. This inferiority is even more acutely felt when these teachers work in an English speaking country. A great number of students choose to do an English course in an English speaking country. Due to the lack of native English teachers, the non-native teachers are hired in many language centres and even universities. Most of the time students experience a grade of disappointment when they realize that their English teacher is a non-native speaker of English. As a result the non-native teachers experience a strong sense of inferiority.

Le Ha Phan, referring to Vietnamese English teachers, points out the disadvantages of the non-native teacher. The author considers that the non-native teachers of English are not able to speak English as fluently as native speakers and of course they can't master the language as the native speakers. This thus causes difficulties in teaching, for example, intonation, rhythm, listening and even pronunciation [10, p. 138]. Besides, there are other factors that lead non-native English teachers to experience a good deal of insecurity in their own abilities [8, p. 43]. Tang (1997), for example, reports on a survey she conducted of a teacher retraining course in Hong Kong, in which she asked local teachers about their perceptions of the proficiency of native – and –non-native speaking teachers of English. A very high percentage of the teachers believed that the native English-speaking teachers were superior to non-native English speaking teachers in speaking (100 per cent), pronunciation (92 per cent), listening (87 per cent), vocabulary (79 per cent), and reading (72 per cent) [cited in 8, p. 43]. At first sight, these percentages prove the superiority of the NETs over the NNETs, and the inferiority of the NNET to the NETs; the latter not realizing that, as, Jeremy Harmer points out, they have many advantages that their “native” colleagues do not [5, p. 119], [4, p. 137]. In the first place, they have had the same experience of learning English as their students are now having and this gives them an instant (even if only subconscious) understanding of what their students are going through [5, p. 119]. Moreover, H. Douglas Brown, states that not only are multiple varieties of English now considered legitimate and acceptable, but also teachers who have actually gone through the process of learning English possess distinct advantages over native speakers [4, p. 137]. In order to show the relative advantages NNETs might have in teaching English, Ellis (2002) conducted a study of three NNETs who teach English in Australia. The data revealed four ways in which the experience of learning English can be conceptualized and drawn on by the teachers : (1) the affective aspects of being a learner allow the teachers to empathize with their students; (2) the experience of different teaching styles and their own learning strategies can be effectively incorporated into their teaching practice; (3) through the conscious process of learning English, they understand the language from the non-native speaker's point of view and explain its patterns to their students clearly; and (4) they can relate their formal training in TESOL to their own experience in learning English [cited in 9, p. 2]. Another advantage of non-native

(or bilingual) teachers is presented by Sandra Lee McKay, who considers that, since non-native speakers have gone through the process of acquiring English as a second language themselves, they often have a highly developed awareness of the structure of the language; in addition, they can anticipate the problems their students may have in acquiring it [8, p. 45]. As Seidhofer (1999) notes that this ability enables bilingual teachers to “get into the skin of the foreigner learner” [cited in 8, p. 243]. Ultimately, being able to do this provides bilingual teachers with a keen sense of what their students need to know. But perhaps the greatest strength of bilingual English teachers, points out the author, is that they provide their students with a model of a good language learner that is relevant to their own social and cultural experiences, a model that no language teachers from another culture can ever provide [8, p. 45]

Therefore, the non-native speaker, who has mastered the English language, who is an excellent communicator and an excellent methodologist, who can deal with the various English levels and students’ needs, who is capable of raising students awareness and motivation by representing himself/herself a real model of being able to reach the proficiency level in speaking a foreign language, is definitely not a worse teacher than his or her native speaker colleague. Conversely, as H. Douglas Brown specifies, native English teacher are clearly and unequivocally not better teachers than NNETs by virtue of their native language background; the most important qualification for a teaching position is training and experience in teaching English [4, p. 138]. The same point of view is shared by Sunyoung Park, who believes that NNETs are not necessarily less qualified teachers than NETs. Through their own successful learning experiences, NNETs can give their students inspiration which might have tremendous influence on the student's future and success. Students often take their teachers as role models and try to emulate their teachers' behaviour [9, p. 1].

### **Who is the ideal teacher who can cope with the challenging task of teaching the English language?**

In order to crystallize the issue under discussion, it is necessary to answer the following questions:

*1. Does the native teacher make the student a better learner?*

No, he doesn't. The native speaker doesn't make the student a better learner. According to Rubin and Thompson, what defines good learners are students who can find their own way (without always having to be guided by their teachers through learning tasks), who are creative, who make intelligent guesses, who make their own opportunities for practice, who make error work for them not against them, and who use contextual clues. It depends on their willingness to learn the language [cited in 5, p. 86]. Moreover, successful mastery of the language will be to a large extent due to a learner's own personal “investment” of time, effort, and attention to the second language in form of an individualized battery of strategies for comprehending and producing the language [4, p. 69]. Thus, it is definitely not the teacher's mother tongue that defines a good learner.

*2. Is the student more motivated to learn the language when his/her teacher is a native speaker of the language?*

No, they aren't. At its most basic level, motivation is some kind of an internal drive which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something. It is influenced by our

goal, the society we live in, the people around us and curiosity [5, p. 98]. Undoubtedly, the teacher has its role in raising students' motivation. And I believe that the non-native English teachers, who are excellent communicators, can raise students' awareness and motivation by the simple fact that they themselves represent a real model of being able to reach the proficiency level in speaking a foreign language.

3. *How much is a teacher supposed to speak in the classroom? How much is a student supposed to listen to the fluency, accuracy, and the metaphorical language of the native-speaking teacher?*

The aim of learning a new language is mostly for communication purpose. Many teachers complain that their students are quiet. Claudia Pesce says that there are several reasons why students are quiet, and one them is the teacher him/herself. The more the teacher speaks, the less students speak [13]. Nowadays, the students can listen to different accents or should I say different Englishes on TV, watching news programmes for formal English, movies for formal and informal English, and lots of reality shows, current affairs programmes etc., in order to listen to real English. Moreover, most of the English course books are accompanied by invaluable audio CDs and video DVDs that use real world conversations focusing on stress, intonation and other features.

4. *Is it possible for non-native English teachers to be good English communicators using fluent, accurate and metaphorical English?*

Yes, it is. It depends on their willingness to achieve the fluency and accuracy in English.

5. *Is it possible for the non-native English teachers to be unlimited in flexibility while teaching the language?*

Yes, it is. It all depends on their pedagogical skills, their initial formation and the ongoing development which aims at promoting teachers' professional growth; it strengthens the teacher's competencies by gaining knowledge and pedagogical skills; it improves the teacher's quality as well as the student's learning performance.

6. *Is it possible for English teachers to work together as a team without any grade of superiority regardless of what their mother tongue is?*

Yes, it is. It is very important to keep in mind the fact that English teachers (native and non-native teachers) make up a team compensating for each other's shortcomings as they have the same amazing task, that of teaching others how to speak a foreign language, thus, opening a new door to many people to a new world, to a world of knowledge, success, a world which offers much more opportunities for professional growth and personal achievement.

7. *Is the native English teacher better than the non-native English teacher?* Certainly not, as it is not the teachers' mother tongue that defines the teacher's pedagogical skills. As Sandra Lee McKay states, certainly language is related to proficiency but there is no causal relationship between the two. An individual could conceivably use English in childhood and not attain a high level of proficiency in the language even when it is the dominant language at home [8, p. 29].

8. *Who is the ideal English teacher?* Although there are lots of advanced skills teachers around the world, none of them can be considered the ideal teacher; instead many of them can be considered excellent teachers. The excellent teachers are those who have knowledge, skills, and competences plus personality, self-confidence, intelligence, open-

mindedness, charisma, and a sense of humour. The excellent teachers are those who carry about their students, have a good communicative tolerance, and create classroom downplaying performance outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

As we move into a new paradigm in which the concepts of native and non-native speaker become less relevant, says H. Douglas Brown, it is perhaps more appropriate to think in terms of proficiency level of a user of a language [4, p. 137]. Speaking is one of four skills and may not deserve in all contexts to be elevated to the sole criterion for proficiency. So, with Murray (2006), Park (2006), Kachru (2005), Kamhi - Stein (2004), McKay (2002) and others, we see that the profession is better served by considering a person's communicative proficiency across the four skills, states the author. He considers that the teachers of English, regardless of their own variety English, can then be judged accordingly, and in turn, their pedagogical training and experience can occupy focal attention [4, p. 137].

Regardless of the fact that a teacher is or is not a native speaker of English, he/she must be qualified and should know his/her craft well. He/she should have the aptitude to motivate students, raise their awareness of how language works, use the right techniques and procedures that best fit the students' needs, provide adequate feedback and have unlimited flexibility when teaching the language. They ought to overpass this inferiority with regard to being a non-native English teacher. In the first place, they have to rise in self-esteem, self-confidence, and overcome anxiety when in the classroom. All this can be achieved by continuing the professional development. At the end of the day, the native English teachers and the non-native English teachers alike, all are in the same circle and what counts most is not where they come from, but their pedagogical skills, their power to transmit the knowledge to the students and their love for this amazing job. The native English teachers and the non-native English teachers alike, have their shortcomings, but they can learn from each other, they can cooperate in order to achieve their common goal: to make the teaching/learning/evaluation process of the English language effective and enjoyable.

According to Jeremy Harmer, teachers sometimes say they are like actors because they feel as if they are always on stage. Others talk of themselves as orchestral conductors because they direct conversation and set the pace and tone. Yet others feel like gardeners because they plant the seeds and then watch them grow [5, p. 107]. To my way of thinking, as English teachers we are actors, orchestral conductors and gardeners at the same time as we are always on stage conducting our orchestra and waiting to reap our harvest at the end of the year. How well we perform on stage, how well our orchestra plays and the harvest we reap at the end of the year, depends not on whether we are native speakers of English or not, but to a large extent on what kind of actors we are, how well we know to conduct the orchestra and what kind of seeds we plant day by day.

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