

Self-perception of Non-native Speaker Teacher of English in the Expanding Circle

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Abstract: In norm-dependent countries, where English is being taught as a foreign language, the main attention is mostly being paid to the native speaker teacher of English language as the ultimate teaching resource. In such countries, native speaker's norm is being considered as the standard by which the language should be taught to non-native speakers. However, in recent years, more emphasis has been given to the significance of non native teachers of English and to the advantages such teachers could have in the process of language teaching (e.g. Ellis, 2005; Llurda, 2005; and Seidlhofer, 1999). In this study, attitudes of the non native teachers of English toward their own status were explored, drawing on an empirical study of the self-perception of Iranian teachers. At the same time, advantages of nonnative speaker teachers as significant resources in the expanding circle are discussed.

Key words: Native speaker teacher, non native speaker teacher and expanding circle

Introduction

Kachru (1996) classifies the various types of Englishes using a circles analogy. The first, known as the Inner Circle, includes countries where English is used as a native language, among them Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. The second, the Outer Circle, includes countries where English is an institutionalized variety, that is, is used as an official language. Former British colonies, such as India, Nigeria, and Zambia, to list a few, belong in this category. The third, the Expanding Circle, consists of countries where English is traditionally used or learned as a foreign language and in which English played little or no administrative or institutional role. Some such countries include Japan, China, Turkey, and Iran. In a nutshell, the Inner Circle varieties are considered as '*norm-providing*', the Outer Circle as '*norm-developing*', whereas English in the Expanding Circle is seen as '*norm-dependent*'.

Phillipson (1992) believes that the native speaker tenet reinforces the linguistic norms of the Center, Inner Circle, creating an ideological dependence. This idea is echoed in Seidlhofer (1999) as she puts emphasis on how non-Inner-Circle English teachers are likely to find themselves in the context of pedagogical theories, methods and institutions in which the main attention is being paid to the *native speaker* as the ultimate teaching resource. Similarly, Thornbury (2006) points out that the educated native speaker's norm has long been considered as the standard by which the language should be taught to non-native speakers. In addition, in many teaching contexts, native speaker teachers has been regarded to have priority over the non natives and native speaker teachers are preferred to non native speaker teachers, irrespective of the training or experience. He clearly states that such assumption is questionable. Llurda (2005, as cited in Vivian, 2007) also states that native speaker teachers were formerly those who spoke with authority because of their ownership of the language; now non-native teachers are the authentic sources of knowledge about what it is like to be an L2 user. Descriptions of native speaker English are a temporary measure until proper descriptions of L2 users are made. Ammon (2000) criticizes the marginalization of non-native speakers in the scientific community. He takes the view that while science and other domains demand that there should indeed be one lingua franca; this raises a problem of justice because native speakers of English are at an advantage.

Using a native or nonnative speaker of language in the classroom has always been a controversial issue in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. For instance, Phillipson (1992) questions 'why should the native speaker be intrinsically better qualified than the non-native?' He says that teachers are made rather than born. Many of them doubtless self-made whether they are natives or non natives. In fact, the untrained or unqualified native speaker is potentially a menace.

Phillipson (1992) criticizes that fact that the ideal teacher is a native speaker, somebody with native speaker proficiency in English who can serve as a model for the students. The native speaker fallacy dates from a time when language teaching was indistinguishable from culture teaching, and when all learners of English were assumed to be familiarizing themselves with the culture that English originates from and for contact with that culture. At the onset, it was the native speaker who was considered as the automatic best teacher, and all other teachers admired the native speaker. Now that is no longer the case.

According to the report made by Unesco (1953), a teacher is not adequately qualified to teach a language merely because it is his/her mother tongue. This statement indicates that native speaker teacher should not be considered as the best embodiment of the target and norm for learners. It is arguable, as a general principle, that non-native speakers may in fact be better qualified than native speakers, if they have gone through the arduous process of acquiring English as a second language and if they have perceived the linguistic and cultural needs of their learners. Similarly, Widdowson (1994) strongly objected to the assumption that a native speaker is always better as a teacher of English than a teacher whose mother tongue is not English.

Who is the best teacher; native speaker of a language or non-native speaker?

Phillipson (1992) emphasizes that language teachers should have a detailed acquaintance with the language and culture of the learners they are responsible for. The very idea of claiming that the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker is ludicrous as soon as one starts identifying the good qualities of a teacher of English. The tenet has no scientific validity.

Agular (2007) believes that, in fact, the best teacher is neither the native nor the non-native speaker, 'but the person who can make students see the connections between their own and other cultures, as well as awaken their curiosity about difference and otherness' (p. 69). That is to say, the task of the ideal teacher is not to provide comprehensive information or bring the foreign society into the classroom for learners to observe and experience but his/her duty is to develop in students the competence that will make them able to connect their own cultural values, beliefs and behaviors (Byram et al. 2002, as cited in Agular, 2007).

Medgyes (1996, as cited in Arnold and Rixon, 2008) believes that whether language teachers are native or non-native speakers may also affect the skills, attitudes to learners and willingness to take risks that they bring to the classroom, with not all of the advantage necessarily being with the native speakers.

Advantages of Non-native Speaker (NNS) EFL Teachers

Seidlhofer (1999) takes the various 'double' aspects of non-native EFL teachers' professional lives as opening the possibility for constructive contributions that they can make. Terms with negative connotations are re-considered to indicate their positive meanings for ELT professionals: *double agent*, *double talk*, *double think*, and *double life*.

According to Kachru and Nelson (2006), such doubling comes to exist as a result of the 'double standards' under which non-native EFL teachers work. They work in a context in which "monoculturalism seems to have been replaced by multiculturalism, monolingualism with multilingualism, and targets seem to be criterion referenced rather than (native-speaker) norm-referenced" (p. 234).

Seidlhofer (1999) believes that non-native EFL teachers should be regarded as 'double agents'. They are members of their own communities, hence; they share similar languages or cultures with their students and they are familiar with 'terrain inhabited by the target language'. The non-native EFL teachers have themselves been non-native EFL learners. They have passed through the process of learning the same language and they know the dilemmas involved in it. Hence, they have 'thorough knowledge of English as it is used in various domains in their societies' (p. 235). Seidlhofer (1999) declares it in the following words:

"One could say that native speakers know the destination, but not the terrain that has to be crossed to get there: they themselves have not traveled the same route. Non-native teachers, on the other hand, know the target language as a foreign language" (p. 238).

At the same time, non-native EFL teachers are involved in 'double talk'. Double talk can be carefully examined by teachers in 'double think', i.e. in which non-Inner-Circle teachers are supposed to consider the two directions about what kind of English to teach for the reason that English as a foreign language is different from English as a first language (Seidlhofer, 1999).

Seidlhofer (1999) concludes that the double capacity of the non-native EFL teachers enables them to be simultaneously familiar with the target language and distanced from it, and it makes it possible for the non-native teachers to lead double lives with positive connotations 'of value and strength, ... something that is twice the size, quantity, value, or strength of something else' (p. 243). As Kachru and Nelson (2006) apparently clarify, "Non-native EFL teachers are well prepared and inherently equipped to put themselves into the place of their students, as contrasted with the pressure to put themselves into the place of native speakers" (p. 106).

Seidlhofer (2000, as cited in Jessner, 2008) argues for a redefinition of the ideal nonnative teacher of English. This need is as a result of the significant increase of English as lingua franca in recent years. She argues that although English nowadays mainly serves as a medium of communication between speakers with different primary languages, the norms of the language is still being controlled by the monolingual minority of its speakers, that is what Phillipson (1992) calls *Linguistic Imperialism*.

According to Medgyes (1983), through his own experience as a persistent learner of English on the one hand, and through the experience gained over the years as a foreign language teacher on the other, NS EFL teacher should know best where the two cultures and, consequently, the two languages converge and diverge. More than any native

speaker, he is aware of the difficulties his students are likely to encounter and the possible errors they are likely to make. Therefore, non-native teacher has easier access to the measures and techniques which may facilitate the students' learning.

Ellis (2005, as cited in Jessner, 2008) points out that the non-native teacher is able to find linguistic problems and offer metacognitive learning strategies that the native teacher without foreign language experience is unable to notice. Such ability of the non native teachers refers to what Seidlhofer (1999) calls it 'the double capacity of the non-native EFL teachers' because, as it was said before, non-native teachers have moved through the process of learning the language and they are familiar with the difficulties that the learners are mostly likely to encounter.

In nutshell, the non native teachers are both members of their own communities and are familiar with the target group. This ability of the non native speakers refers to the 'double life' suggested by seidlhofer (1999). Consequently, in this context, non-native teachers become particularly valued for their ability to move between the home and target cultures (Corbett 2003, as cited in Agular, 2007), although, a curious and, open-minded native teacher, especially if widely-traveled, can be equally or better valued.

Tang (1997) states NNS teachers 'not only play a pedagogical role in their classrooms, but they also serve as empathetic listeners for beginning and weak students, needs analysts, agents of change, and coaches for public examinations in the local context' (p. 579).

Some people would argue that a qualified native-speaker EFL teacher will always be in a better position than his/her nonnative-speaker colleague of equal qualification—simply because the language and culture that s/he teaches to his/her students will always be, or at least "look", more "authentically native". Tarnopolsky (2008) classifies some advantages that nonnative teachers of EFL might have over their native speaker colleagues; *firstly*, it is possible for NNS EFL teachers to apply their students' mother tongue whenever and wherever it can facilitate and accelerate the process of learning English. *Secondly*, they can pave the way for developing their students' interlingual awareness by making comparisons and making them aware of the similarities and differences that exist between the structures of their L1 and target language. *Thirdly*, they are better prepared for developing their students' intercultural awareness by comparing similarities and differences between the L1 and target culture, which is considered to be the only way of developing the learners' target culture sociolinguistic behaviors in the conditions where students have no or very little direct contact with target culture communities. Of course, this advantage of NNS EFL teacher is apparent when he/she is well aware of the target speech communities' cultural characteristics. 'Understanding cultural and sociolinguistic differences should be among the teachers' professional requirements—just as understanding the linguistic characteristics of the language that they teach'. (p. 313)

There are two other advantages that the NNS EFL teachers might have in the process of language teaching. The first of them, as Tarnopolsky (2008) indicates, refers to the fact that NNS EFL teachers, who share the mother tongue of their students and who may have worked through similar problems in learning English, are better prepared to deal appropriately with those specific learners' problems. Hence, they are most likely to better understand the essence of students' difficulties while a NS EFL teacher might be unable to observe these problems. Tarnopolsky is, in part, echoing Seidlhofer's (1999) views toward NNS EFL teachers. As it was cited before, passing through the process of learning the same language, teachers are familiar with the difficulties that learners might encounter. Similarly, Tang (1997) believes that being familiar with the source language and non-native speaker teachers' status as L2 learners could be seen as two significant advantages of the NNS EFL teachers. Their previous L2 learning experience offers them a privileged understanding of the problems and weaknesses of their students. Medgyes (1983) points out that more than any native speaker, NNS teacher is aware of the difficulties his/her students are likely to encounter and the possible errors they are likely to make. The second advantage refers to purely psychological advantage. Students may prefer the fallible nonnative-speaker teacher who presents a more achievable model because students may feel overwhelmed by native-speaker teachers who have achieved a perfection that is out of students' reach (Cook, 1999).

However, all the advantages listed above should not lead use to overlook the importance attached the native speaker EFL teachers. In addition, as Tarnopolsky (2008), declares we should not adopt 'a view opposite to the long established perspective that NS EFL teachers should have no say in EFL teaching situations and that only their NNS colleagues can be the absolute authorities on all related issues.' (p. 314)

Challenges for Non-native Speaker (NNS) EFL Teachers

Tarnopolsky (2008) lists a number of challenges that NNS EFL teachers face. They are summarized as five principal points:

1. Majority of the NNS EFL teachers have a foreign accent and the best of them often cannot overcome it during their career even if their visits to English-speaking countries are lengthy. The reason is that if a foreign language is learnt after the puberty, native-like pronunciation is rarely achieved, despite years of practice.
2. For NNS EFL teachers, however competent they are, it is very difficult to be aware of the most recent developments in the English language because as every other living language, it is constantly changing. As

a rule, NNS EFL teachers do not frequently visit English-speaking countries and they do not stay lengthy enough to keep track of all such changes.

3. The NNS EFL teachers might not be aware of the most recent developments in the English-speaking nations' cultures, including the developments in patterns of sociolinguistic behaviors. So they might lack such cultural awareness. There are a significant number of the NNS EFL teachers, who have never been to English-speaking countries, and may not even be aware of essential differences in such patterns as compared to their home cultures.
4. Another challenge is the limited availability of the latest and most advanced teaching materials and methods developed in English speaking countries—that is, those that are better known to their NS EFL colleagues and are much more accessible to them.
5. The last and perhaps most serious challenge is the fact that in many parts of the world both students and school and university authorities believe that a native speaker is always the best teacher of English and thus prefer to be taught or to employ NS EFL instructors to the detriment of their NNS colleagues. This is one of the visible manifestations of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992).

To put in a nutshell, NNS EFL teachers have many strengths but may encounter some considerable challenges as well.

To sum up, according to Tarnopolsky (2008), advantages of NS EFL teachers could be summarized as follows: 'authentic native English, full awareness of its most recent linguistic and cultural developments, and better awareness of the most advanced and recent developments in the ways of teaching the language' (p. 315). However, the challenges that NS EFL teachers might face are: 'no or little command of their students' L1 and home culture, lack of ability to develop their interlingual and intercultural awareness, lack of understanding the learners' L1 related language problems, and presenting a model that learners may believe unachievable'.

Inspired by the studies on the self-perception of the non-native speaker teachers, I decided to carry out a study on the use of the native language in Iran context, where English is taught as a foreign language and where majority of the language teachers are non-native speaker teachers.

Method of the Study

A questionnaire was devised to investigate the self-perception of non-native speaker teachers of English, and their feelings of confidence and/or insecurity in EFL context. In the first three questions, I tried to get some demographic information about the teachers. The questions inquired their age, year of experience in teaching, and their educational background. In the last three questions, attempt was made to investigate the self-perception of the non-native speaker teachers of English. They were analyzed in detail.

Sampling and Data Analysis Processes

The vast majority of teachers of English in Iran are non-native speakers. This questionnaire was sent out to 87 teachers throughout Iran, and exactly 61 were returned. However, only 44 of them were taken to final evaluation since some of them lacked the information required. Data was analyzed using SPSS package program (Version 11.5). Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the demographic information of the participants.

Findings and Discussion

Demographic information gathered via a questionnaire revealed that half of the respondents (N = 22) were aging from 26 to 30. The mean of scores obtained for the age of the participants is 3.18 and the standard deviation is 0.87 with the variance of 0.75. They have been teaching for a mean of 29 ± 1 years. As it is evident in Table 2, the educational background of the participants were ranging from a high school diploma (N = 1) to Ph.D. (N = 2). The participants with bachelor's degree constitute more than 77 % of the respondents. The mean of scores obtained for the educational background of the participants is 5.18 and the standard deviation is 5.74 with the variance of 32.94. The information about their age and educational background is given in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1: **Demographic information about the age of the participants**

	N	Percent
21-25	9	20.5

26-30	22	50
31-35	9	20.5
Over 36	4	9.1
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Total	44	100

Table 2: Demographic information about the educational background of the participants

	N	Percent
A high school diploma	1	2.3
Bachelor's Degree	34	77.3
Master's Degree	7	15.9
PhD	2	4.5
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Total	44	100

Among the six questions asked the last three are of particular relevance here. The fourth question aimed at getting some information about whether native speaker teacher or non-native teacher of English could be an effective teacher of English in EFL context. It was to get some information on their self-perception and their attitudes toward their native or non-native colleagues. It was a multiple choice question but the respondents were encouraged to briefly explain the reason for their choice. It enabled them to explain their rationale for that. Only just over 10 (22.7%) went for the second option, i.e. that the main emphasis had been on non-native teacher of English language, while 34 (77.3%) said the native teacher of English language had been in the foreground.

The purpose of the fifth question was to get some information on whether the non-native teacher should be as near-native as possible or he/she should strive to become an effective foreign language teacher. It was also an open-ended question. More than half of the participants (68.2%) indicated that being as near-native as possible is the most prominent factor, and only 31.8% said the reverse was true.

Finally, the sixth question was asked to study whether being a non native teacher of English in the classroom makes them feel insecure or confident. According to the results, 54.5% believed that being a non-native speaker teacher makes them insecure or stress out, while 45.5% said that the reverse was true and being a non native makes them feel confident. Descriptive Statistics of the last three questions are represented in Table 3. Some respondents did not tick either option in the last three questions, but gave a verbal response such as 'neither-nor', 'neither and both' or 'it depends', offering various reasons and explanations.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of the three questions

	M	SD
Question 4	1.22	0.42
Question 5	1.32	0.47
Question 6	1.45	0.50

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of the present study on the self-perception of the non-native speaker teacher of English in Iran as an EFL context revealed some differences in contrast to the previous research studies. Different from the previous research findings (Seidlhofer, 1999), 77.3% of teachers of English participating in this study stated that native speaker teacher of English could be more effective teacher of English than the non-natives in EFL context.

In a study carried out by Seidlhofer (1999), the participants (60%) felt that becoming an effective foreign language teacher is more important than being as near-native as possible (37%). However, according to the findings of my study, 68.2% of the respondents indicated that being as near-native as possible is the more important than being an effectible teacher (31.8%). Similar to the findings in Seidlhofer's (1999) study, more than half of the participants (54.5%) indicated the being a non-native speaker teacher of English made them feel insecure rather than confident.

A research study was conducted by Tang (1997) to investigate non-native English second language teachers' perceptions of the proficiency and competency of native- and nonnative-speaking teachers of English, and the advantages and disadvantages for English language learners of having a non-native English second language teacher and a native English second language teacher, a comparison of the English proficiency of the two types of teachers, and their different roles in the classroom. According to the results, a very high percentage of respondents believed that native English second language teachers were superior to non-native English second language teachers in speaking (100%), pronunciation (92%), listening (87%), vocabulary (79%), and reading (72%). In contrast, non-native English second language teachers were felt to be associated with accuracy rather than fluency. This finding indicates the fact that native English second language teachers are more often respected as models in English language learning. Results of my study also draw some parallels with the previous research in terms of considering native speaker teachers of English as models in English language learning.

The greatest disadvantage that NS EFL teachers have is not knowing (or having very little knowledge) of their students' L1 and culture. These difficulties could disappear if they learned both thoroughly. A recent study by Ellis (2006, as cited in Tang, 1997) convincingly proves the greatest professional advantages that NS English teachers can get if they undertake learning an L2. It allows them to understand and deal much better with the dilemmas of their students learning English. However, majority of the NS EFL teachers who have stayed in one and the same country for a long time know very little about its language and culture. Therefore, the difficulties of NS EFL teachers that result from not knowing the local language and culture are probably here to stay in the majority of cases (Tang, 1997).

As results revealed, more attention should be paid to the significant role played by the non-native speaker teachers in EFL contexts to make them aware of the advantages that they have in such contexts. According to the results obtained in this study, the participants were not aware of the advantages of being a non-native speaker teacher in their particular local conditions. As Seidlhofer (1999) clarifies, teacher education plays a crucial role in making teacher aware of their non-native assets and in preparing them explicitly to use these assets in the development of an appropriate pedagogy.

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