A Critical Analysis of Non-Native English Teacher

Jia Kun

Senior Researcher of

Chinese University MOOC

E-mail: quincyjk@connect.hku.hk
Mobile Phone: +86 13824319450
Address: 10 Xibeiwang East Road, Haidian District, Beijing
Corresponding Author: Jia Kun

Abstract

The role of native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) has always been a heatedly-discussed issue in the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL). As shown in the relevant literature, both NESTs and NNESTs have certain merits and demerits. The former dominate the privileged position in English language teaching due to their innate linguistic competence and proficiency, while the latter serve as adequate learning models for EFL learners as they are by nature qualified as English language users. This paper aims to conduct a balanced and critical analysis of NESTs and NNESTs in depth, and further elaborate on the interrelationship of NNESTs and EFL/ EIL (English as an international language), particularly in mainland China. Finally, some pedagogical implications are provided to suggest and advance future teaching and learning of English in the EFL context.

Keywords: NESTs, NNESTs, EFL, EIL

1. Introduction

As native speakers (NSs) are conventionally considered as the only credible linguistic data source (Chomsky, 1965, cited in Moussu, 2008), the works related to non-native speakers (NNSs) are extremely limited before the 1990s. The native speaker is dead is seen as the first endeavor to question the norm of NSs, where Paikeday claims that NSs only exit in linguists' illusion (1985), and the term 'proficient user' (p. 12) is adopted by him to refer to all the speakers who can manage

to use a language, for proficiency in speaking a language no longer depends on the 'bio-developmental definition' (Davies, 1996, p. 156), but on the competence to use the language properly, the competence which can be shared by both NSs and NNSs (Modiano, 1999). Therefore, it has raised the vigorous debate on the role of native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) in English language teaching. NESTs have dominated a privileged position in English language teaching for a long period of time (Canagarajah, 1999; Phillipson, 1992), for their " 'competence' or 'proficiency' or 'knowledge of the language' is a necessary point of reference for the second language proficiency concept used in language teaching″ (Stern, 1983, p. 341). Nevertheless, NNESTs, as proficient second language users whose experience of L2 learning enables them to become excellent learning models, have the advantages over NESTs in certain aspects (Medgyes, 1994; Cook, 1999).

Based on these conflicting opinions, this paper aims to analyze the role of NESTs in the context of English as a foreign language in order to draw pedagogical implications to facilitate future language teaching and learning, particularly in mainland China. Hence, the authors first performed a balanced analysis of NESTs and NNESTs. Following this, the role of NESTs in EFL instruction is discussed in depth. Due to its large population of EFL learners, the Chinese mainland has attracted increasing attention from home and abroad, and its social and educational context is appropriate for research on the role of NESTs. Thus, the status of English in mainland China and the perceptions and attitudes of learners towards NESTs are elaborated. Finally, some implications are drawn in order to suggest and advance further English teaching and learning in the EFL context.

2. A Balanced Analysis of NESTs and NNESTs

Widdowson (1992) points out that NESTs can be trustworthy language informants, while NNESTs are more competent than NESTs in terms of the role of language instructors, namely that both of them have irreplaceable strengths due to their distinctive linguistic backgrounds, as he argues "although native speakers obviously have the more extensive experience as English users, the non-native speakers have had experience as English language learners" (p. 338). Therefore, the merits and demerits of NESTs and NNESTs should be considered from a critical perspective.

2.1 Advantages of NESTs

In order to examine the merits of NESTs, it is first necessary to clarify what conceptualizes NSs. Bloomfield defines that "the first language a human being learns to speak is his native language; he is a native speaker of this language" (1933, p. 43), which is consistent with the 'bio-developmental definition' (1996, p. 156) proposed by Davies that native speakers learn the L1 in their childhood. It determines they share some common characteristics proposed by Stern (1983) that they possess implicit knowledge of rules; subconscious understanding of meaning; good communicative

competence; a wide range of intuitive language skills and creative use of language. Even though some characteristics are debatable (Cook, 1999), for example, some native speakers may have barriers to communicating within social settings. Only a few native speakers are able to use language creatively at the literal level, and it cannot prevent them from being an adequate model for the learners because they are 'qualified' by nature as English language users (Widdowson, 1992).

Moreover, the advantages of NSs are commonly reflected in the course books where the content is heavily based on the NSs' language usage, and the model situations constantly involve the NSs' interactions (ibid.). In The Practice of English Language Teaching, Harmer (1991) notes that students should follow the example set by NSs in terms of the newly-learnt language items. As a result, NESTs have the evident merit of providing students with first-hand and authentic linguistic resources, thanks to their unique cultural knowledge, good communicative abilities and personal experiences.

In addition, numerous SLA research methods, including error analysis, grammatical judgments and obligatory occurrences, tend to compare L2 learners with NSs, for the L2 learners' success or failure is often evaluated by the standards provided by the NSs (Cook, 1999). However, according to the interlanguage hypothesis (Selinker, 1972), it is difficult for L2 learners to be native-like, as Ellis points out that "learners often failed initially to produce correct sentences and instead display language that was markedly deviant from target language norms" (1994, p. 15). As a result, NESTs have a strong voice in English language teaching as 'target language norm' holders.

2.2 Advantages of NNESTs

In contrast to native speakers, an 'L2 user' is someone who uses an L2 and is always different from an 'L2 learner' who is still in the process of L2 learning. (Cook, 1999). Although there are some overlaps between each other due to the difficulty of defining the endpoints of L2 learning, the distinction is still necessary for the discussion. The term 'expert speakers' proposed by Rampton (1990) refers to all the successful users of a language, which is further elaborated on by Davies (2003) who believes that it is possible for L2 learners to become native speakers of the target language in terms of spontaneity, grammar, pragmatic competence, interpretation ability and creativity. From this perspective, the boundary between NSs and NNSs has been blurred due to the varying respects of 'expertise' (Rampton, 1990) or 'proficiency' (Davies, 1996), namely that NNESTs have the potential to achieve native-like proficiency level and become qualified linguistic models.

However, linguistic competence only cannot contribute to a good language teacher (Ma, 2012), for which Phillipson (1992) questions whether NSs are "intrinsically better qualified" than NNs (p. 194). Moreover, he goes on to explain that since most NSs have learned their L2 by the time they are cognitively mature, they are better prepared to impart this knowledge to other L2 learners than

NSs who learn L1 in childhood. In other words, the meta-cognition strategy developed in the L2 learning process of NESTs can be a valuable resource in their L2 teaching process. Furthermore, Kramsch argues that NNESTs should not imitate the monolingual NSs blindly and ignore their irreplaceable multilingual advantages in terms of language, literature and culture (1997), which highlights NNESTs' multicultural backgrounds and their own learning experiences.

Moreover, Medgyes (1994) summarizes six advantages of NNESTs: 1) They provide good learning models and guides to students as they used to be successful L2 learners; 2) They are capable of teaching learning strategies more efficiently due to their own experiences; 3) They are competent to impart more knowledge about language to the students thanks to their better language awareness; 4) They understand students' needs and difficulties so that they can set reasonable goals for them; 5) They are more sensitive to learners' problems and have better anticipation and prediction of their learning; 6) They are able to take advantage of the L1 to compare with the L2 in EFL settings. In a similar vein, Ellis (2006) points out that along with a decent command of skills in linguistics, pedagogy and methodology, a good teacher has to experience the process of learning and using the L2 so as to understand students' learning experiences. In addition, NNESTs as successful L2 users can get students motivated more easily (Lee, 2000) because students are willing to emulate the proficient and successful L2 user model provided by NNESTs in action (Cook, 1999).

2.3 NESTs and NNESTs

As mentioned earlier, both NESTs and NNESTs have certain strengths and weaknesses. Matsuda (1997, p. 13) suggests that all the teachers are supposed to be treated as "a cooperative learning community and consider their development holistically", which means the focus should be shifted from comparing deficiencies and competencies to mutual help and cooperation. Similarly, Braine (1999) posits that both NESTs and NNESTs are indispensable and necessary in language teaching where they need to collaborate with each other and take full advantage of their competencies and skills. Even though such successful cooperation between NETs and NNETs is difficult to find in the literature (de Oliveira & Richardson, 2001), the joint efforts from both still need to be encouraged and motivated.

3. The Role of NNESTs in EFL Teaching

As more people speak English as a second language or foreign language rather than an L1, the ownership of English has been shared by these newly-arrived 'Outer Circle' (Kachru, 1976) English-speaking communities, who therefore have the right to 're-define' the language (Widdowson, 1994). The gradual acceptance of English as an international language (EIL) is one of the most crucial reasons that NNESTs are increasingly required and appreciated, especially in the EFL context. This is in line with the opinion held by Llurda (2004) that with the prevalence of

English as the world lingua franca, NNSs will be the most desirable and favorable choice to guide the students to the EIL realm.

Firstly, as Alptekin (2002) argues, teachers of EFL are supposed to integrate localized learning materials and tasks with the international contexts which are relevant and meaningful to learners' lives. That is to say, NNESTs are able to stimulate learners' interest and motivation in learning the L2 through developing their understanding and appreciation of their own language and culture, which makes them more suitable "as agents facilitating learning by mediating between the different languages and cultures through appropriate pedagogy" (Seidlhofer, 1999, p. 238). Moreover, it is supported by McKay (2000) who convincingly argues that NNESTs are supposed to devote attention and time to learners' own culture by providing them with opportunities to communicate with other English speakers about their own culture. Moreover, Halliday (1968, p. 165) points out that "a speaker who is ashamed of his own language habits suffers a basic injury", namely that NNESTs should help L2 learners to establish their own identity and guarantee a critical as well as multicultural perspective in the process of L2 learning.

Secondly, the term 'multicompetence' coined by Cook (1991) referring to the co-existing condition of two languages, endows another advantage to NNESTs, who are viewed as multicompetent language users in possession of the privilege of bilingualism (Kramsch, 1997). Likewise, Dendrinos (2001) argues that English language teaching in EFL context should enable learners to switch flexibly from L1 to L2. The experience of moving from L1 to the target language can enhance NESTs' awareness and understanding of diagnosing learners' errors and difficulties. In addition, compared with monolingual users, NNESTs have experienced the process of using English as a medium to express themselves and interact with people from different cultural backgrounds (Llurda, 2004) so that they provide better models and guidance of multicultural communicative competence for students during the teaching process.

4. NNETS in Mainland China
4.1 English in Mainland China

Within the framework of 'English as an International Language' and 'World Englishes', Hu (2004) claims that China English as a definite and potential English variety should differ from the standard varieties of British, American and other Englishes. Therefore, before analyzing the present state of English in mainland China, the terms 'China English', 'Chinese English' and 'Chinglish' need to be further clarified. Li (1993) notes that standard English is the basis for China English which expresses Chinese culture and demonstrates distinct Chinese features in the word choice and sentence structure but without any mother tongue intervention, while Chinese English and Chinglish refer to the language containing inappropriate lexis and ungrammatical sentences, which constantly results in the incomprehensibility and break-down of the communication (Hu, 2004). As for China

English, Xu (2002) summarizes four characteristics of it: 1) Varying pronunciation: as Mandarin is spoken with various phonology features and accents, it will take a long period for China English to get standardized; 2) Some terms contain and express archetypal Chinese culture; 3) Flexible syntactic features, for example, the subject-free structures results from the L1 interference; 4) Diverse text patterns: For instance, Chinese tends to elicit the main statement at the end, while English expressions are used to going straight to the topic. Based on these features of China English, Hu (2004) argues that China English is more desirable and appropriate in the Chinese context, and it should be treated as a standard variety of English because China English conveys distinctive Chinese culture, fulfills better communicative and social functions in Chinese people's daily life. Consequently, based on the Chinese situation of English learning, it is necessary to have an in-depth analysis of learners' attitudes and preferences so as to have a more comprehensive perception of the role of NNESTs in the Chinese context.

4.2 Learner Perspectives and Attitudes towards NNETs
Some interview data in Jin's research (2005, p. 44) are demonstrated as follows:
Question: "Do you think China English can be accepted as Standard English?"
S1: "At the moment, Standard English equates with British or American English; China English could be accepted as one of the Standards Englishes one day, but it takes time."
S2: "Standard English only means British or American English; China English may be accepted by the Chinese, but it will never be accepted by the world."
S3: "I believe China English will be accepted as Standard English gradually."
Question: "Which do you prefer: NETs or NNETs?"
S1: "Both have their own advantages: native speaker teachers can offer more reliable knowledge in the respect of culture and linguistics; Chinese teachers know what my learning difficulty is."
S2: "Even though a Chinese teacher has stayed abroad for many years, he cannot be better in teaching English than native speakers."
S3: "At the moment I will choose a Chinese to teach me English because he may be better able to help with my grammar; when my English reaches a higher level, I will choose a native speaker teacher."
According to Jin's research (2005), the results suggest that China English and EIF are partially accepted by students, even though the second interviewee still firmly believes that only British and American English can be called standard. Although the other two students are in favor of China English, they reckon that it will take a long period of time to get China English widely accepted. In addition, their attitudes towards World Englishes and EIL contribute to their preference for NESTs

and NNESTs. In other words, the increasing willingness to accept NNETs derives from the gradual acceptance of EIL, which agrees with the perspective held by Seildhofer (1999) that NNESTs should be positively evaluated in the EIL context.

Learners tend to blindly aspire to the NS norm due to the lack of opportunities to update their perceptions of World English or EIL. Therefore, education regarding EIL is deeply required to enhance learners' awareness of English varieties. In addition, the vast majority of NNESTs in China are frequently neglected and devalued in the EFL context (Xu, 2002). Thus it is more reasonable and feasible to provide relative education and training for them rather than seeking NESTs outside, inform them of updated information about EIL/EFL, and enhance their awareness and understanding of their own values.

Conclusion

The issue of NESTs and NNESTs should be viewed critically and balanced, as each has incomparable merits and neither is perfect. Consequently, the cooperation between reliable language informants (NESTs) and advantageous language instructors (NNESTs) is highly recommended, as Jenkins (2000) claims that one single model is not sufficient enough for ESL/EFL learners, but they need to be exposed to a broader range of English varieties presented by teachers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. There is no doubt that with the gradual acceptance and further understanding of EIF and World English, there is a tendency to attach more importance and value to NESTs, especially in the context of EFL, because of their ability to provide learners with more effective learning strategies and tailor their learning to their individual differences. Flexible switching between L1 and L2, a common cultural background shared with the learner, and a fruitful learning experience as an L2 learner also entitles them to 'authority' and 'privilege' in EFL teaching. Nevertheless, many NNESTs are unaware of their unique identities as successful L2 users and perceive themselves as deficient English speakers. Instead, the value of NNESTs should be acknowledged and appreciated, as Willis (1996) notes that learners are supposed to encounter "an internationally acceptable version of the target language" (p. 12) rather than only one native variety. As a consequence, considering the development of English today, it is essential to set appropriate targets for L2 learners. Instead, being native-like is no longer the ultimate goal for L2 learners in the context of EIF. Still, they have the right to choose the model most relevant and conducive to their experience and future development.

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