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**Native vs. Nonnative English Teachers in Polish Schools:  
Personal Reflections**

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## ABSTRACT

**This article discusses the strengths and weaknesses of native and nonnative English teachers in Polish schools in light of the researchers' personal language teaching experience and language teacher research and training. It is argued that the NS/NNS controversy is oversimplified and ignores the complexities of teacher training, language learning, and language proficiency. It is further argued that NS English teachers should be employed in Poland because they teach in their own language, use current idioms, provide information about English speaking countries and enhance the credibility of programs. Furthermore, the importance of NNS English teachers in Polish schools is stressed. The discussion closes by emphasizing the importance of both NS and NNS English teachers having successful classroom second language learning experiences themselves and an adequate skill set in language teaching.**

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## Introduction

In 1982, sociolinguist Joshua Fishman observed that “the sun never sets on the English language” (Fishman, 1982, p. 18). In 1997, Graddol from the British Council noted that the number of English second language speakers far exceeds the number English first language speakers, and this implies that “English is no longer the privilege of native speakers” (Graddol, 1997; Medgyes, 2001, p. 429). These statements from the 1980s and 1990s foreshadow a current controversy between native speaker (NS) teachers and nonnative speaker (NNS) English teachers. Research from Applied Linguistics establishes that the dichotomy is oversimplified and ignores the complexities of teacher training, language learning, and language proficiency for both NS and NNS alike.

Nevertheless, high quality English language teaching is very important for individual success and program credibility. However, a large unexpected influx of immigrants may compromise an ability to provide quality language instruction. Such seems to be the case for Ireland and Great Britain which have “open door” policies for Polish workers, meaning that citizens of Poland have the same right to be employed in these countries as Irish and British nationals.<sup>1</sup> On the flipside of the coin, Poland must also provide quality English language instruction. Thus, the purpose of this article is to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of NS and NNS English teachers in Polish schools. More specifically, against a background description of foreign languages in Polish curriculum, this article redefines the NS vs. NNS controversy and reports observations from personal experiences and teacher surveys in the interest of guiding well-grounded decisions in English language programs.

## **Foreign Languages in Polish Curriculum and New Teacher Training Colleges**

Foreign languages have been part of the Polish school curriculum for some time. Starting in the late 1940s, Russian was adopted as the primary foreign language to be instructed to all students from age 11 upwards, regardless of the type of institution (Janowski, 1992, p. 43). A “West European language” was offered as a “second foreign language” only to pupils attending full secondary school, in other words, institutions leading to a school leaving certificate (Janowski, 1992: 43). From the 1989-90 academic year onward, the learning of Russian ceased to be compulsory, and at about the same time, the Polish government began to encourage the widespread teaching of West European languages in schools (Janowski, 1992, p. 50).

In support of the government’s new policy on West European languages, 55 new teacher training colleges were opened throughout Poland (Janowski, 1992, p.51). By 1992, two foreign organizations had endorsed this new training initiative by sending volunteers to Poland: 1) Solidarity Eastern Europe, a Canadian company, and 2) the American Peace Corps. Dr. Norman Butler has first-hand knowledge of the activities of these organizations. In 1991, he was recruited by Solidarity Eastern Europe to teach English at Rzeszow University of Technology, and while he was there, he got to know one Peace Corps worker.

### **Defining the Native Speaker Controversy**

At the bottom of the NS vs. NNS controversy lies the native speaker model. The NS model begins to break down when one begins to define criteria and measurements to distinguish NS from NNS (or NS proficiency from NNS proficiency). A usual starting point for defining “nativeness” is country of birth (Medgyes, 2001, p. 430). However, many individuals live and marry across social or political language boundaries. The next criteria may be that a person’s childhood and education must be spent in an English speaking country. However, there are many English speaking countries (UK, US, Australia, India, Nigeria, Singapore) whose standard English dialects differ. Even in “traditional” English speaking countries, college educated NS English teachers regularly use English that is remarkably similar or quantifiably less standard than college educated NNS English teachers (Smith, 2004). A look at corpus linguistics data (i.e., empirically collected natural language use) illustrates the non-standard English of NS conversation:

“It looks more organized. And it looks more excellent to me, it looks more curly. Like, that’s what I thought you were, you wanted to do” (Conrad, Biber, & Leech 2002, p. 100).

Nevertheless, the NS model has been responsible for unprofessional favouritism in institutions, publishing houses, and government agencies (Medgyes, 2001, p. 433). Teacher training programs may primarily address the needs of NS teachers. Publishers seem to tailor materials to the needs and preferences of NS teachers. Recommendations submitted by NS may be accepted without challenge while those submitted by NNS may be ignored. NS with little or no teaching qualifications may be hired before experienced

NNS. The story of the NS backpacker with no teaching qualifications or experience finding a job in a language institute has been too common, as is this rejection letter from a London language school: “I am afraid we have to insist that all our teachers are native speakers of English. Our students do not travel halfway round the world only to be taught by a nonnative speaker (however good that person’s English may be)” (Illés, 1991; Medgyes, 2001, p.87).

Because of these practices, there has been a backlash against NS English teachers. In 1991, TESOL, Inc., passed a resolution to take necessary action against discriminatory hiring practices (Medgyes, 2001, p. 432). Highly prominent researchers have spoken out against such practices. In 1994, Widdowson wrote that English “is not a possession which [native speakers] lease out to others, while still retaining a freehold. Other people actually own it” (Widdowson, 1994, p.385). Likewise, in 1997, Norton wrote that English “belongs to all people who speak it, whether native and nonnative, whether ESL or EFL, whether standard or non-standard” (Norton, 1997, p. 427).

And yet, the native speaker ideal survives. Davies observes that “the native speaker is a fine myth: we need it as a model, a goal, almost an inspiration; but it is useless as a measure; it will not help us define our goals” (Davies, 1996, p. 157). Thus, the NS vs. NNS controversy warrants re-examination. The following sections draw on the personal experiences of Dr. Norman Butler, the survey research of Medgyes (1994), and the experiences of Dr. Catherine Smith.

### **Personal Reflections on NS vs. NNS Teachers of English**

This section presents first-hand observations by Dr. Norman Butler, whose experience teaching English covers a period of 14 years at three Polish higher institutions: Technical University of Krakow, AGH University of Science and Technology, and Rzeszow University of Technology.

#### **Personal Reflections on NS Teachers of English**

Students are more likely to learn how to speak English when taught by a native as opposed to a nonnative teacher of English. It is not natural for Poles to speak to one another in English. Nevertheless, some of Dr. Butler’s students at AGH University of Science and Technology have told him that it is easier for them to communicate in English with non-native teachers than it is with their foreign counterparts. Dr. Butler could identify with his students’ remarks. When Dr. Butler studied Polish it was often easier for him to communicate (in Polish) with his fellow students than with native Poles.

Native teachers of English employ current idioms when speaking and writing when in fact their Polish tallies make use of outdated ones. This is not surprising because many non-native teachers have limited contact with native speakers of English. It is quite expensive for Poles to travel to English speaking countries.

Native instructors of English interact with non-native teachers enabling them to maintain and increase their level of competence in the target language. For example,

when Dr. Butler was employed at Rzeszow University of Technology a Peace Corps volunteer, he organized conversation classes for all members of the teaching staff. Furthermore, native teacher interactions involving colleagues and students leads to increased information about English speaking countries.

Native instructors enhance the credibility of English language programs. This is a strong incentive for Polish school systems to hire native speakers. Interestingly, language schools in Poland advertise that they have native speakers of English on staff in the hope that they will attract more students.

It is important to ease cultural shock that natives teachers of English experience upon arriving in Poland, and facilitate the psycho-sociological process of acculturation. This can be done by:

1. Assigning nonnative teachers to assist newcomers in such matters as finding accommodation, acquiring a visa, etc.
2. Enrolling native teachers in Polish language courses.

### **Personal Reflections on NNS Teachers of English**

Nonnative teachers of English have teaching strengths that native teachers do not possess. They are more familiar with the difficulties of learning English than their foreign counterparts because they have had direct experience in acquiring the target language. For instance, nonnative teachers are more conscious of when to instruct students to use present simple verb forms vs. present continuous verb forms than native teachers. (Note: English has a complex verb system of two tenses (past, nonpast) and three aspects (simple, perfect, progressive) which are often mistakenly referred to as tenses in traditional grammar. In Polish, there is only one present tense).

Finally, it has been Dr. Butler’s experience than it is easier for nonnative instructors of English to teach beginners than it is for their foreign counterparts.

### **Medgyes’s (1994) Study on NS vs. NNS Teachers of English**

Medgyes’s (1994) research on NS vs. NNS teachers of English supports and elaborates on Dr. Butler’s personal experiences. Medgyes surveyed 325 teachers from 11 countries; 86% were NNS and 14% were NS teachers. Figure 1 reproduces the results on these teachers’ self-reported teaching behaviours. Results of the surveys indicate that the central issue separating NS and NNS English teachers is not competence but simply difference. Each group brings different talents and needs to the profession.

Figure 1: Reproduction of Medgyes’s (1994) Survey of NS and NNS English Teachers

<b>NS English Teachers</b>	<b>NNS English Teachers</b>
<i>Use of English</i>	
speak better English use real language use English more confidently	speak poorer English use “bookish” language use English less confidently

<i>General Attitude</i>	
adopt a more flexible approach are more innovative are less empathetic attend to perceived needs have far-fetched expectations are more casual are less committed	adopt a more guided approach are more cautious are more empathetic attend to real needs have realistic expectations are stricter are more committed
<i>Attitude to Teaching Language</i>	
are less insightful focus on: fluency meaning language in use oral skills colloquial registers teach items in context prefer free activities favour group work/pair work use a variety of materials tolerate errors set fewer tests use no/less L1 resort to no/less translation assign less homework	are more insightful focus on: accuracy form grammar rules printed word formal registers teach items in isolation prefer controlled activities favour frontal work use a single textbook correct/punish errors set more tests use more L1 resort to more translation assign more homework
<i>Attitude to Teaching Culture</i>	
supply more cultural information	supply less cultural information

### **Personal Reflections on Second Language Teachers**

This paper closes with reflections from Dr. Catherine Smith, who has first-hand experience teaching German, French and English as foreign languages in the US and Europe, experience training NS and NNS teachers of English, and experience in comparative analysis of English language skills in NS and NNS English teachers. In her experience, teachers teach as they were taught, and the strongest predictor of language teaching success is having successful second language classroom learning experiences oneself. Bilinguals do not necessarily make good language teachers (many bilinguals learned their second language in natural settings, not classroom setting); rather, successful classroom language learning experience is the crucial factor for both NS and NNS teachers alike. “The multicompetent, multilingual teacher is qualitatively different and incomparably more capable than the monolingual teacher” (Cook, 1999; Medgyes, 2001). This multicompetence includes an understanding of how to apply language learning theories to create salient, organized English instruction in systematic classroom practices, and to provide numerous opportunities to use English in scaffolded activities that move in a continuum from word level to discourse level. Furthermore, an accurate

knowledge of the structure and functions of English across different contexts of language use (which is not represented in traditional or transformational grammar) is crucial in both language teaching and assessment. These skills are fundamental for both NS and NNS English teachers as well as the success and credibility of English language programs.

### Note

1. According to the Irish Examiner, 33,000 Polish workers have arrived in Ireland since Poland's accession to the EU in May 2004.

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