

Observations on Native vs. Nonnative EFL Teachers in Poland

Catherine Smith, PhD

Assistant Professor in Applied Linguistics

Department of English

Troy University

Troy, Alabama, USA

Norman L. Butler

Doctor of Humanities Degree in Pedagogy

Lecturer in English

Department of Foreign Languages

AGH University of Science and Technology

Cracow, Poland

Teresa Ann Hughes, PhD

(First Recipient of PhD at PVAMU, December 2006)

PhD Student in Educational Leadership

Prairie View A&M University

College of Education

David Herrington, PhD

Assistant Professor

Department of Educational Leadership

Prairie View A&M University

Member of the Texas A&M University System

William Allan Kritsonis, PhD

Professor

PhD Program in Educational Leadership

Prairie View A&M University

Member of the Texas A&M University System

Visiting Lecturer (2005)

Oxford Round Table

University of Oxford, Oxford, England

Distinguished Alumnus (2004)

Central Washington University

College of Education and Professional Studies

Ellensburg, Washington

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.

Introduction

In 1982, sociolinguist Joshua Fishman observed that "the sun never sets on the English language" (Fishman, 1982: 18). In 1997, Graddol from the British Council noted that the number of L2 English speakers far exceeds the number of L1 English speakers, implying that "English is no longer the privilege of native speakers" (Graddol 1997 in Medgyes 2001: 429). These statements from the 1980s and 1990s foreshadow a current controversy between native speaker (NS) teachers and nonnative speaker (NNS) English teachers. Additionally, quality English language teaching is important for student success and program credibility, and a large unexpected influx of immigrants can compromise an institute's ability to provide this. Such

seems to be the case for the UK, which has an “open door” policy for Polish workers¹. Also, Poland must provide quality English language instruction. 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. Thus, this article defines the NS vs. NNS controversy and reports observations in the interest of informing decisions in English language programs.

Defining the Native vs. Nonnative Speaker Controversy

At the bottom of the NS vs. NNS controversy lies the NS model. The NS model breaks down when one defines criteria to distinguish NS vs. NNS proficiency. “Nativeness” is often defined by country of birth (Medgyes 2001: 430). However, many individuals live and marry across social or political language boundaries. The next criteria may be a person’s childhood and education. However, there are many English speaking countries (UK, US, Australia, India) whose standard English dialects differ. Even in “traditional” English speaking countries, college educated NS English teachers regularly use English that is similar to 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 nonstandard 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 and Leech 2002: 100).

Nevertheless, the NS model has been responsible for unprofessional favouritism (Medgyes 2001: 433). For example, teacher training programs may primarily address the needs of NS teachers; publishers may tailor materials to the needs of NS teachers; and NS may be hired without proper teacher training. Because of these practices, there has been a backlash against NS English teachers. For example, in 1991, TESOL, Inc., passed a resolution to take necessary action against discriminatory hiring practices (Medgyes 2001: 432). Also, researchers have spoken out against such practices, claiming 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: 385), and English “belongs to all people who speak it, whether native and nonnative, whether ESL or EFL, whether standard or non-standard” (Norton 1997: 427). Yet, the NS 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: 157). Thus, the NS vs. NNS controversy warrants re-examination, which is done in the following sections.

Butler’s Observations on NS vs. NNS EFL Teachers

Dr. Norman Butler has experience teaching English over 14 years at three Polish higher institutions: Technical University of Cracow, AGH University of Science and Technology, and Rzeszow University of Technology. Based on his experiences, it seems students are more likely to learn how to speak English when taught by a NS vs. a NNS since it is not natural for Poles to speak to one another in English. Nevertheless, some of Butler’s students at AGH University of Science and Technology have told him that it is easier for them to communicate in English with NNS teachers than with their foreign counterparts. Butler could identify with his students’ remarks. When Butler studied Polish it was often easier for him to communicate (in Polish) with his fellow students than with native Poles.

NS English teachers employ current idioms when speaking and writing while their Polish tallies use outdated ones. This is not surprising because many NNS teachers have limited contact with NS since it is quite expensive for Poles to travel to English speaking countries. However, NS English teachers can interact with NNS teachers and help them increase their English proficiency. For example, when Butler was employed at Rzeszow University of Technology as a Peace Corps volunteer, he organized conversation classes for all members of the teaching staff. Furthermore, NS teacher interactions with colleagues and students increases information about English speaking countries. Thus, NS English teachers enhance the credibility of English language programs. This is a strong incentive for Polish school systems to hire NS, and language schools in Poland advertise that they have NS on staff in the hope that they will attract more students. However, it is important to ease cultural shock that NS teachers experience upon arriving in Poland, and facilitate the psycho-sociological process of acculturation. This can be done by assigning NNS teachers to assist newcomers in finding accommodation, acquiring a visa, etc., and enrolling newcomers in Polish language courses.

NNS English teachers have teaching strengths that NS 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, NNS 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). Lastly, it has been Butler's experience that it is easier for NNS English teachers to teach beginners than it is for their foreign counterparts.

Medgyes's (1994) Study on NS vs. NNS English Teachers

Medgyes's (1994) research on NS vs. NNS English teachers elaborates on Butler's personal experiences. Medgyes surveyed 325 teachers from 11 countries; 86% were NNS and 14% were NS teachers. Figure 1 shows the results of these teachers' self-reported teaching behaviours. Results 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: Medgyes's (1994) Survey of NS and NNS English Teachers

NS English Teachers	NNS English Teachers
<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

Smith's Observations on Second Language Teachers

This paper closes with observations from Dr. Catherine Smith, who has experience teaching German, French and English as foreign languages in the US and Europe, training NS and NNS English teachers, and analysing 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 in 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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