

The Obstacles for Non-native English Speakers to Become English Teachers

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Introduction

English has been one of the most important languages in the world for a long time, which means that teaching and learning English also became a very important activity, and the demand for teachers grows constantly. Obviously, there are not enough native speaker teachers of English to teach all the interested in the language in the world, and therefore non-native speakers are needed. About 80 percent of the English teachers worldwide are non-native English speakers (Fuad Selvi, 2011, p. 187). Being a language teacher is not only a matter of knowing the language intuitively as a native speaker does. There are linguistic and pedagogical aspects that make difference when teaching and learning languages that should be taken into consideration as well. Despite that, being a non-native English speaker still seems to be a problem when it comes to teaching the language.

Phillipson (1992, p. 13) explains that the native-speaker ideal comes from a model of language teaching based on culture teaching, where the learners of English were supposed to be familiarized with the culture that the language originated from. This teaching approach was probably the best way to go when English was not the worldwide language that it is today. However, the fact that English is spoken by people in all continents and taught by teachers whose mother tongues are not necessarily English, makes the language lose its original identity and acquire a new one, more global and intercultural. For all these reasons, the discussion of being a native or non-native speaker teacher should be properly addressed, since it has consequences for most teachers and even students. According to Fuad Selvi (2011) and Callahan (2006), the distinction between native and non-native speaker teachers might lead to unprofessional favoritism for the native speakers. American institutions that teach languages other than English even advertise for “native or near-native fluency” in the target language (Callahan, 2006, p. 22). Some negative consequences for the non-native speaker teachers could be low self-esteem and bad performance in the classroom. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the obstacles for non-native English speakers to become English teachers, as well as to show that it is possible to overcome such obstacles.

Myths and Assumptions

There are several arguments trying to prove that native speakers are better language teachers than non-native speakers. Rampton (1990, p. 97) explains that the idea of being a native speaker of a language implies at least five things: language is inherited, inheriting a language means being able to speak it well, people can only be native speakers or non-native speakers, being a native speaker means comprehending the language, and people are native speakers of one mother tongue only. These ideas have been strongly contested, and Rampton (1990, p. 98) explains the reasons for this: people acquire languages socially and not through birth; people participate in several groups during the whole life, which makes the language change over time; being a native speaker does not mean that the person can use their mother tongue well, without making mistakes; and most countries are multilingual, which means that many people have more than one mother tongue. In addition, Rampton mentions that there are ideological and political interests in keeping these ideas, but the biological aspects of language learning or acquisition should not be mixed with social identification.

The discussion surrounding native speaker and non-native speaker teachers has been influential within ELT but it is not exclusive of the English language. Meadows and Muramatsu (2007) show that foreign language teaching in general tends to follow the same assumption that a native speaker of the target language is a better teacher than a non-native speaker. After interviewing several university students of Japanese, Chinese, Spanish and Italian in the United States, the researchers obtained valuable information on this matter. The students showed conflicting expectations for themselves and for the teachers. They accept that their own communicative competence level can be basic, and argue that pronunciation should not be a criterion for judging a successful speaker of a foreign language. On the other hand, when it comes to the teacher's skills, pronunciation and cultural knowledge are the primary criteria for a good foreign language teacher, who should be able to "pronounce the language the way that the students believe to be the standard" (Meadows & Muramatsu, 2007, p. 102). The teachers are also seen by the students in different ways: the native speaker teacher is seen as a model of the language, while the non-native speaker as "an interpretation of the language" (Meadows & Muramatsu, 2007, p. 102). Another important result obtained in this research is the direct relation between the students' goals and the preference for native or non-native speaker teachers. Those who want to obtain a native-like fluency tend to prefer native speaker teachers, while those who have lower goals can be satisfied with non-native speaker teachers.

Callahan (2006, p. 22) also shows that the debate on native/non-speaker teachers is not exclusive of the English language. In American universities, students change language classes according to the teachers' surnames, giving preference to those whose surname seems to have the same origin as the target language. Advanced students of English as second language and students of Spanish were interviewed in Callahan's study at a university in the United States. In both groups, there was a general preference for native speaker teachers, although a bit higher for the ESL students. The students of English consider it easier to understand native speaker teachers, while the students of Spanish prefer non-native speakers, since they tend to speak slower and clearer. In addition, the interviews showed that the more experience with languages the students have, the more they tend to accept non-native speaker teachers. Both groups showed that they prefer non-native speaker teachers teaching grammar and reading, and native speaker teachers teaching cultural aspects and oral skills, but the students of English had a stronger opinion about it. They also agreed on two other points: non-native speaker teachers are better at seeing and understanding the students' struggles with the language, and in regards to the language course level, non-native speaker teachers are well accepted for basic and intermediate levels, while for more advanced levels, a native speaker is preferred (Callahan, 2006, pp. 29-39).

Arguments and Advice for Non-native Speaker Teachers

Phillipson (1992, p. 14) argues that teachers' knowledge in language learning processes, structure, usage of language and capacity to explain it have to be learned. Only knowing the language as a mother tongue is not enough to teach it properly. Non-native teachers may actually be better qualified than native speaker teachers since they have gone through the process of learning both the student's L1 and the target language, which gives them a linguistic and cultural insight of their learners' needs (Phillipson, 1992, p. 15). This argument does not take into consideration a multicultural classroom with multiple L1s, where the teacher's awareness of the L1 is not as important. However, it is still an advantage to have been through the same process as the students. How far British and American expertise can be exported to contexts with different cultural, linguistic and pedagogical universes is also questioned by Phillipson (1992, p. 16).

Rampton (1990) adds valuable aspects to this discussion. He suggests replacing or displacing the concept of 'native speaker' with 'expert speaker'. Expertise is fair for both the

teacher and the learner, because if native-speaker competence is the expected result, the learner will feel that it is unreachable. On the other hand, expertise gives the students more specific and reasonable goals. The focus changes from “‘who you are’ to ‘what you know’”, which becomes more fair for the non-native speaker teachers (Rampton, 1990, pp. 98-99). Rampton (1990) concludes by saying that we should “not assume that nationality and ethnicity are the same as language ability and language allegiance” (p. 100).

Callahan (2006, p. 27) gives the non-native speaker teachers practical suggestions on what to do if the students question their competence. For instance, when the student argues that a native speaker knows more about the language, the non-native teacher can ask the student to explain certain aspects of the L1, which would show the student that he or she knows less about the L1 than he or she presumed. When questioned about the pronunciation, the non-native speaker teachers should tell the students to take advantage of their slower speech and see it as a motivation not to limit their target language exposure to the classroom only.

Conclusion

Considering that most arguments against non-native speaker teachers are very subjective, and that there are possible interests involving two of the most important economies in the world, the United States and the United Kingdom, it seems a bit difficult to obtain a final answer or solution that satisfies all the parts. However, as English continues to grow in the world, and to be used in different contexts, we can expect a change in values and expectations regarding language teaching in general. We should keep focusing on appropriate teacher training and constant competence improvement for both native and non-native speaker teachers. In addition, besides excellent knowledge in the language, the teacher, no matter his or her origin, should have the ability to translate the linguistic knowledge to a comprehensible language that fits the learners' needs.

References

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