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Contextualizing teacher identity of non-native-English speakers in U.S. secondary ESL classrooms: A Bakhtinian perspective

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ABSTRACT

Research on teacher identity has become increasingly vital to understanding language teachers and their professional practice. While teacher identity has been highlighted as situated, multiple and dynamic, the image of non-native teachers of English seems rigid and polarized. A gap has not been filled in is to examine the diversity of non-native teachers of English rather than solidifying them into a single group. This qualitative study aims to contextualize teacher identity of non-native speakers of English as both an individual and a social matter at an under-explored U.S. secondary ESL setting. Drawing on Bakhtin's dialogism, the study illustrates how non-native teachers of English make sense of themselves is formed through past histories and present environments. Their understanding of self is also interwoven with the perceptions of administrators and their relationships with students. Pedagogical implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Research on teacher identity has become increasingly vital to understanding language teachers and their professional practice. The concept of situated, multiple, and dynamic identity forms a common feature across studies grounded in multiple theories. This line of inquiry examines layers of structural influences on language teaching and the continuum of professional development. The classroom is framed as a space where teachers negotiate their sense of self in relation to their students and the sociopolitical environments in which they are located (Alsup, 2006; Clarke, 2008; Gao, 2012; Mockler, 2011; Varghese, 2006). The significance of teacher identity is explicated by Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson (2005): "In order to understand teachers, we need to have a clearer sense of who they are: the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which they claim or which are assigned to them" (p. 22). One issue in language teacher education particularly pertinent to the study of teacher identity is non-native teachers of English (NNESs).

The binary that categorizes English language teachers into native and non-native speakers has been extensively documented because linguistic membership is enacted to define the ideal English language teacher based upon one's country of origin and first language rather than teaching preparation. This phenomenon, known as the native speaker fallacy (Phillipson, 1992) can be traced back to the 1961 Commonwealth Conference on ESL in Makerere, Uganda, where it was widely believed that native speakers could perform a language and represent the culture of that language more accurately than their non-native counterparts. This fallacy has had a profound impact on hiring practices and the view of students on authentic English speakers that consequently sidelines NNESs. One professional tension with which NNESs continue to wrestle is that their

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English competence is often regarded as deviating from the native norm, in particularly, English with British-and/or American accents. Therefore, NNESs' linguistic expertise is perceived as insufficiently native to establish their credibility as English language teachers. While teacher identity studies have highlighted the asymmetrical relationship between native (NESs) and non-native teachers, sustained through a larger social dimension, teaching strengths of native and non-native teachers have been described to underscore the contributions that each group can make to the classroom (Braine, 1999, 2010; Cheung and Braine, 2007; Kamhi-Stein, 2004; Ma, 2012; Mahboob, 2004, 2010; Moussu & Llurda, 2008). Nevertheless, the image of NNESs seems rigid and polarized in the field of language teacher education.

Although being a language teacher highlights the multifaceted memberships to which individuals subscribe, a major problem in NNES literature is solidifying NNESs into a single group rather than accentuating their diversity. Kubota and Lin (2009) discuss the racialized aspect of native and non-native speakers to acknowledge the experiences of ESL/EFL professionals of color, given that "native speaker" is often equated with "White." In their state-of-the-art article on NNESs, Moussu and Llurda (2008) assert that "there is a need to deepen our knowledge of language teaching and how different factors among individual teachers may affect their performance" (p. 338). Likewise, Park (2012) observes that "attention to diversity within these [NNESs] has been limited" (p. 129). These differences include instructional contexts, education levels, and teacher backgrounds. Next, there is little classroom observation-based research that explores the situated NNES teacher identity, i.e., how NNESs' understandings of self emerge from their interactions with groups and how they occur in institutions. Questionnaires identifying the attitudes of students and administrators toward NNESs are the most common form of data collection. Findings from several studies suggest that preferences for NESs tend to bar NNESs from employment, and students have a strong desire to study with NESs. Furthermore, even when both NESs and NNESs make similar teaching mistakes, NNESs' credibility is more likely to be challenged (Clark & Paran, 2007; Evrim, 2007; Mahboob, 2010). In contrast, other studies conclude that administrators and students have similar perceptions of NESs and NNESs. Results from Nemtchinova's (2005) questionnaire study on the perceptions of host teachers with regard to non-native student teachers in the United States indicate that their accents and grammatical errors are not considered problematic. Additionally, the survey conducted by Grubbs, Jantarach, and Kettern (2010) on college students' opinions in Thailand finds that students perceive both NESs and NNESs as effective English speakers and indicate their preference to study with both NESs and NNESs. Methodologically, Grubbs et al. (2010) emphasize that studies on preferences for NES/NNES "need to be examined carefully in terms of how extraneous variables might affect conclusions" (p. 573).

Along the same lines, much research on NNESs has been conducted in the EFL sphere and university-level ESL courses (e.g., Braine, 2010; Grubbs et al., 2010; Ma, 2012; Mahboob, 2010; Moussu & Llurda, 2008; Park, 2012). Little is known, however, about how the K-12 ESL setting constitutes individual perceptions of NNESs and constructs their professional images and practices. The uniqueness of K-12 ESL schooling lies in its culturally and linguistically diverse student population. Many U.S. educators advocate a more diverse teaching force, similar to the students' backgrounds, to better prepare them for academic success (e.g., Banks & McGee Banks, 2009). Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) contradicts the native speaker fallacy by arguing that nativeness is least relevant when evaluating teacher qualifications in an ESL context "where the learners can hear, read, and often also interact with native speaker models everyday if they desire this" (p. 38). For many NNESs, the process of forging a positive teacher identity can be haunted by beliefs with regard to nativeness. Empirical research is, therefore, crucial to improve our understanding of the NNES identity at a secondary ESL level as both a social and an individual matter. This is the goal of the current paper.

The social aspect of NNES identity is contextualized by a qualitative approach with the goal of portraying the nature of research settings and weaving the perceptions of administrators, students, and teachers themselves. The diversity of NNESs is addressed by examining how teacher participants interpret the imposed NNES category. The analysis is also based on biographies of the teachers, which illustrate their individual differences, including nationality, education, and familial background. The diversity will be further analyzed by looking at the teachers' classroom practices. The existing literature often generalizes the teaching characteristics of NNESs. This practice can oversimplify teaching embedded in knowledge about the professional discipline, personal history, and schooling structures (Alsup, 2006; Mockler, 2011; Varghese, 2006), and the teacher's ability to use English is equally important. What follows is a theoretical framework, grounded in Bakhtinian dialogism, which is used to explore the formation of NNES teacher identity in secondary ESL programs in the United States.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that theorizes NNES identity is Bakhtin's dialogism. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (2003) maintain that dialogism illustrates the notion of identity as similar to a conversation one is engaged in with interlocutors and environments. Dialogism views meaning-making built upon others' perspectives and stratified with social values. According to Bakhtin (1994), "[the word] exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intention: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own" (p. 77). One is being addressed. Meanwhile, one responds to and appropriates the words of others to cast one's understanding of self based upon others' perspectives. These self-understandings, anchored to the multiplicity and contradiction of language use, guide one's behavior, thought, and speech.

The ethnographic study of Holland et al. on female identity in Naudada illustrates how girls are defined and claim themselves as female. The female image that these girls articulate is constructed through activities they participate in daily. They are brought up by enacting their roles as good daughters, wives, and mothers who do house chores, respect men