



Strengths and weaknesses of NESTs and NNESTs: Perceptions of NNESTs in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Since non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) are always compared with native English speaking teachers (NESTs) on linguistic grounds, their strengths and weaknesses as English teachers are worthy of investigation. This paper reports on a mixed methods study which examines the strengths and weaknesses of NNESTs and NESTs through the perceptions of NNESTs in Hong Kong. Data were collected through a questionnaire completed by 53 NNESTs teaching in secondary schools and three semi-structured individual interviews for the purpose of data triangulation. Findings show that NNESTs and NESTs are perceived to have distinctive linguistic, socio-cultural and pedagogical strengths and weaknesses. While NNESTs are thought to have strong pedagogical strengths, they have linguistic weaknesses. While NESTs are perceived to have strong linguistic strengths, they have pedagogical weaknesses. An interesting finding is that some of the perceived strengths and weaknesses are complementary. This paper has theoretical implications for language teacher expertise and practical suggestions for teacher preparation.

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1. Introduction

It was estimated that approximately three quarters of the ESL (English as a second language) or EFL (English as a foreign language) teaching workforce worldwide are non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) (Canagarajah, 1999, 2005; Kachru, 1996). As NNESTs constitute the majority of teachers in the field of TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages), their role and potential contributions are worth investigating. Nevertheless, there has been limited research on NNESTs until the last two decades or so. Ever since Medgyes's (1994) pioneering work which discusses the notion of NNESTs and their positive and negative characteristics, there has been a growing interest in conducting empirical studies concerning NNESTs. One major area of research is the investigation of NNESTs' self-perceptions.

Teachers' self-perceptions are worthy of investigation because their beliefs and self-image often influence their teaching (Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999). Examining NNESTs' self-perceptions are even more important because they are always compared with their native counterparts on the grounds of accent, grammar or knowledge of vocabulary (Boyle, 1997; Braine, 2010; Medgyes, 1994; Rajagopalan, 2005). Some NNESTs have developed a sense of inferiority and/or a lack of self-confidence (Bernat, 2008; Llurda & Huguet, 2003; Rajagopalan, 2005). In addition, the common belief that native speakers are ideal teachers has resulted in NNESTs suffering from being second-class "citizens" in the field of TESOL (Ellis, 2002; Rajagopalan, 2005). Previous research into NNESTs' self-perceptions have focused mainly on their English language proficiency (Amin, 1997; Kamhi-Stein, Aagard, Ching, Paik, & Sasser, 2004; Llurda & Huguet, 2003; Reves & Medgyes, 1994; Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999; Tang, 1997), factors affecting their command of English (Reves & Medgyes,

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1994) and the effects of their language proficiency on teaching (Llurda & Huguet, 2003; Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999). Some of these studies (e.g., Kamhi-Stein et al., 2004; Moussu, 2006; Reves & Medgyes, 1994) have also investigated how NNESTs perceive their strengths and weaknesses as English teachers but extensive research on this issue is limited. Studies that examine NNESTs' perceptions of their native counterparts are even fewer, with the exception of Reves and Medgyes (1994) and Tang (1997).

This paper investigates how a group of NNESTs in Hong Kong perceive their strengths and weaknesses as English teachers as well as those of the native counterparts. The purpose of this study is to contribute to the debate of whether NESTs and NNESTs are better teachers, to help both NNESTs and NESTs develop a deeper understanding of their value and limitations as English teachers, and more importantly, to enable them to improve their teaching performance. The findings show that NNESTs and NESTs have different linguistic, socio-cultural and pedagogical strengths and weaknesses, and therefore, they should not be compared purely on linguistic grounds. The findings of this study have strong implications for the theory of language teacher expertise and this paper offers practical suggestions for teacher preparation.

This paper is set out as follows: In Section 2, the theoretical background is presented, including a discussion of the idealization of native speakers, the positive and negative aspects of NESTs and NNESTs, and previous research into the strengths and weaknesses of NESTs and NNESTs. Section 3 details the mixed methods research methodology adopted in this study, including participant profiles, research instruments, data collection procedures, and data analysis. In Section 4, the findings of this study are presented, followed by a discussion of the findings in Section 5. Finally, the implications and limitations of this study are discussed in Section 6. In this paper, terms such as “NESTs” and “NNESTs” are used, given the lack of generally accepted alternatives and the continued use of these terms by most in the field.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Idealization of the native speaker

The linguistic authority of the native speaker was established because of their greater facility in demonstrating fluent, idiomatically appropriate language, and in appreciating the cultural aspects of a language (Chomsky, 1965). However, the idealization of the native speaker as fully competent users of their language is problematic because “being born into a group does not mean that you automatically speak its language well” (Rampton, 1990, p. 98). Native speakers of a language may not possess all the knowledge about the language they speak. In fact, the construct of “native speakers” is complex and cannot be precisely defined (Davies, 2003).

Despite this, native speakers are believed to be ideal English teachers and models for language learners (Cook, 2005; Llurda, 2004), and this belief was labelled as the “native speaker fallacy” (Phillipson, 1992). Although whether NESTs are intrinsically better qualified teachers than NNESTs is in doubt (Phillipson, 1992) and their validity as models for English learners has been questioned (Amin, 2001; Edge, 1988; Kirkpatrick, 2006), there have been signs of discrimination against NNESTs in the ELT (English Language Teaching) job market. NESTs are sometimes given a preference in employment (Braine, 1999; Canagarajah, 1999; Clark & Paran, 2007; Cook, 2005; Kramsch, 1997; Widdowson, 1992) and the label “native speaker” is often a requirement in job advertisements (Kirkpatrick, 2006; Shin, 2008). English teachers are evaluated by their first language rather than their teaching experiences, professional preparation and linguistic expertise.

2.2. Discussion of positive and negative aspects of NNESTs and NESTs

The positive and negative aspects of NNESTs and NESTs have been widely discussed in the literature. Regarding the positive aspects of NNESTs, Medgyes (1994) hypothesises that NNESTs can: (a) provide a good learner model for imitation; (b) teach language learning strategies more effectively; (c) supply learners with more information about the English language; (d) anticipate and prevent language difficulties better; (e) be more empathetic to the needs and problems of learners; (f) make use of the learners' mother tongue (p. 51). Cook (2005) adds that NNESTs have deeper knowledge of the educational system than the expatriate native speaking teachers from another country. Phillipson (1996) suggests that the L2 learning experiences of NNESTs can sensitise them to students' linguistic and cultural needs.

As for the positive aspects of NESTs, Stern (1983) points out that their linguistic knowledge, proficiency or competence is a necessary point of reference for the concept of language proficiency in language teaching. Widdowson (1992) proposes that a native speaker teacher can be a reliable informant of linguistic knowledge because of their extensive experience as English users, while a non-native speaker teacher can take up the role of an instructor because of their L2 learning experiences. The quote “the native-speaker teacher is in a better position to know what is appropriate in contexts of language use. (...) But it is the nonnative-speaker teacher who is in a better position to know what is appropriate in the contexts of language learning” (Widdowson, 1994, p. 387) best summarises the positive aspects of a native and a non-native speaker teacher.

Regarding the negative aspects of NNESTs, they are often considered less proficient English users than NESTs, “poorer listeners, speakers, readers and writers” (Medgyes, 1994, p. 33), and can never achieve native speakers' competence (Medgyes, 1992). However, it is doubtful whether all native English speakers can be better language users than non-natives in all the four language skills. As for the negative aspects of NESTs, they may lack the necessary insights into lesson preparation and delivery (Shaw, 1979), and fail to take the initiative in learning other languages and other cultures since everybody speaks their own language (Widdowson, 1992). For those NESTs who teach in another country, they lack cultural and linguistic

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