

Do Non-Native Speakers Make Good ESL Teachers?

The acronym “NNEST” is a relatively new one in the field of second-language teaching. It stands for “Non-Native English-Speaking Teacher.” As more and more NNESTs are entering the field of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), questions are being raised about their effectiveness as ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers, students’ perceptions, and the validity of hiring them. More than 1,500 papers have been written about non-native English-speaking teachers.¹

Hiring non-native English speakers has been a common practice in higher education in the United States. Although students frequently react negatively to their non-native instructors’ foreign accents and hard-to-comprehend speech, the validity of hiring or renewing the contracts of these instructors is seldom seriously challenged. The instructor’s scholarship and subject-matter knowledge are seen as taking precedence over their being native born.

However, when it comes to teaching English as a Second Language, administrators seem to have some reservations about hiring non-native speakers as teachers. Despite the TESOL organization’s deliberate attempt to curb the current hiring practices that discriminate against non-native speakers,

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most NNESTs still feel that it is hard for them to find jobs. In fact, non-native candidates often come across English Language Teaching (ELT) job announcements that openly state that only native speakers are qualified candidates. Although many cases of successful NNESTs have been documented,² the debate still goes on.

Definition

The category “non-native speakers” includes many variables, such as the length of the person’s stay in the target country where English is spoken, the extent of his or her schooling in that country, and his or her expertise in and experience with the English language. Although substantial variations exist in these elements, most non-native speakers report that they struggle with feelings of inadequacy and lack of confidence. Nonetheless, more and more non-native speakers are entering the field of TESOL. Recently, NNEST has been added to the TESOL interest section, as its growing body of members recognizes the need for mentoring among themselves and for advocating their rights to fair employment opportunities. In fact, many people see NNEST not just as a group of people with similar interests, but as a movement.³

The administrators of Adventist institutions also face the challenging question of whether or not to hire NNESTs. Currently, at least three Adventist higher education institutions in the United

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States have NNESTs in their ESL programs. Although the ESL programs in most Adventist institutions in North America are still relatively small, our administrators will continue to face this issue as long as the number of non-native-speaking applicants continues to rise.

Recognizing that hiring a foreign ESL director is unprecedented, I consider my current workplace a nontraditional institution and myself a nontraditional director. I was born and grew up in Korea and came to the United States to further my studies in English at the age of 21. Although I had a passion for teaching and several years of successful teaching experience, I had no intention of assuming a leadership position as an ESL director at a higher education institution in the United States. But I did actually end up obtaining a position I never thought I would, or should, hold. However, my experience and cumulative observations as a non-native speaking English teacher and director have reassured me that a NNEST can bring unique benefits to an ESL program.

A Role Model

First of all, a NNEST can be a successful learner model for his or her second-language students and can provide students with effective language-learning strategies. Plus, students seem to perceive their NNEST teacher as a role model. To illustrate, whenever I state in my classes that I did not come to the United States until the age of 21, which is about the age of most of my students, I never fail to catch the glimmer of hope in their



eyes. In fact, a few have said, “Then I have hope, too!” Interacting with a NNEST can be an inspiration to these students.

The NNEST’s own experience as an English-language learner also enables him or her to explain subject matter, such as grammar and pronunciation, more effectively. In general, NNESTs have better knowledge of the grammar and phonology of the English language than other ESL teachers.⁴ As an

ESL director, I have an opportunity to hire about a dozen undergraduate tutors for my ESL students each semester. In many cases, I find that the non-native-speaking tutors explain grammar features better than most native speakers, who can frequently be heard giving a one-answer-fits-all response, such as: “That’s just the way it is!”

In addition, a NNEST can alert the students to common linguistic mistakes that they might make. To use a medical analogy, a non-native teacher can “prevent” rather than “treat.” The teacher’s own linguistic bloopers can be valuable resources, too. When I taught at a middle school in Atlanta, Georgia, I once made an indelible non-native speaker mistake in an inclusion language arts classroom that cracked up my entire class of 8th graders when I failed to hold the second syllable of “worksh-e-e-t” long enough. For many second-language learners whose native languages do not distinguish long and short vowel sounds as the English language does, this kind of naïve pronunciation error is common, as in “sheep and ship” or “cheap and chip.” These kinds of blunders can easily turn into an embarrassing and ludicrous gaffe, which can undermine sensitive students’ self-esteem. This embarrassing incident was not only an unforgettable pronunciation lesson for me but also taught me that the language teacher’s own mistakes can be memorable teaching resources for second-language learners. Yes, my anecdotal lessons really work for my ESL students!

Social and Cultural Guide

Furthermore, a NNEST can be an effective guide for ESL learners in relation to the social and cultural aspects of language learning. Being an ESL student involves far more than just acquiring language skills such as grammar, speaking, reading, and writing. For most ESL students, it also requires learning about a new country, overcoming culture shock, and struggling to fit in with their new peers. NNESTs’ background enables them to address ESL issues wholistically and empathetically because they know that being an ESL student also means being mostly alone in a cavernous dorm



during breaks, being considered socially inept by one's native-speaking peers, and reluctantly accepting a somewhat marginalized status, where one's campus job choices are limited to custodian or cafeteria worker.

In April 2007, America suffered a terrible tragedy at Virginia Tech, caused by a former ESL student who, to quote his sister, constantly "struggled to fit in." As a former ESL student myself, I wonder if we as a society could have saved Seung Hui Cho. Might Cho have turned out differently if his initial experience in the U.S. had been more positive? Although I do not know the answer or the detailed history of his mental illness, most ESL learners can easily relate to the kind of frustration, loneliness, strangeness, and anger that Cho struggled with for many years as an outsider in his new culture. That's why the teacher who has had firsthand experience with similar struggles often goes beyond the 50-minute lesson plan. His or her curriculum is not limited to formal classroom teaching but also includes lessons in other aspects of the ESL experience, as well as moral support. ESL students often feel that they are marginalized due to their limited English. The NNEST sees his or her students' emotional and social issues as just as important as the language issues.

Fluency in Students' Languages Beneficial

NNESTs can also form positive relations with their students due to their unique background. I've observed that students tend to relate better when their teacher can speak their first language. Although I wholeheartedly believe that "English only" is the best form of language teaching, many benefits accrue when the teacher can speak the students' mother tongue. Currently, in Southwestern Adventist University's program, the majority of students are Spanish speakers, and it has been beneficial to hire some teachers and tutors who can speak Spanish, especially for beginning learners. I have found that for adult ESL learners whose English proficiency is quite low, their first language allows them to freely ask questions, which is essential for a meaningful learning experience.

It is sad that some language program administrators, especially in countries like Korea and Japan, prefer to hire unqualified native speakers instead of qualified NNESTs.⁵ In these countries, North American whites are preferred, regardless of their credentials, and many qualified non-native speaking teachers are not even considered. For instance, Sunder reports that most of the English teachers hired in Korea are "untrained to teach and know little or nothing about teaching."⁶

Advantages and Disadvantages

Nobody would challenge the value of an effective native-speaking English teacher, and there's no doubt that a non-native speaker possesses some disadvantages such as having an accent and being less familiar with semantics, idioms, and slang expressions. However, the teacher's enthusiasm, caring attitude, professional training, and subject-matter knowledge are important elements of good language teaching. While native

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speakers may be perfect language models for their students to copy, non-native-speaking teachers can be a better guide. They can more effectively direct their students to effective language models from which they have benefited and offer successful language learning strategies they have used. As most successful language learners discover, a significant amount of learning takes place outside the

classroom. A 50-minute classroom session should serve as a period of introduction, guidance, and reinforcement. It is not, and cannot be, the main source of language input.

As the pendulum of current trends in this field shifts to a preference for real-life English, a good ESL teacher should be defined as someone who considers variations of English as the status quo and alerts, as well as exposes his or her students to them because no language can be correctly understood outside its context—the societies where it is used and the people who speak it. Because English is spoken not only by whites, but also by many ethnic groups in several countries (U.S., Canada, Britain and its former colonies, etc.), the definition of "proper English" should be broadened to acknowledge this variety. Therefore, exposing students to "different Englishes" and to real-life English will be beneficial, not harmful, because when ESL students finish their courses, most of them will enter university classes taught by non-native instructors, and will later function in a society filled with people from different ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

Native speakers and non-native speakers have different strengths as language teachers. NNESTs certainly have some challenges; however, they also possess some unique advantages that can be invaluable assets to the ESL program. ☞



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