NNESTs

JUN LIU

Framing the Issue

Non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), is a term that refers to those teachers who speak English as a second or foreign language. While this definition is not without controversy, the majority of teachers teaching English around the world belong to this group either as perceived by themselves or by others. The controversies, however, derive from several grounds: linguistic (e.g., the sequence in which English is learned, competence in English versus another language), sociocultural (e.g., cultural affiliation, self-identification, or social identity), and political (e.g., power relationship, environment).

In the last two decades, the profession of TESOL has witnessed an increase in the number of NNESTs voicing their concerns and expressing their visions as TESOL professionals (Liu, 1999). Their unique perspectives have increased an awareness of the impact NNESTs have on their students and the important roles NNESTs play in TESOL have been increasingly recognized (e.g., Medgyes, 1994). The role of English in context as well as in contact should be taken into account when addressing such concerns. Given that language is an identity for so many speakers of English, the stereotype of NNESTs as inferior to NESTs (or vice versa) is currently being challenged by many in the TESOL profession because of the development and progress in the fields of world Englishes, English as an international language, English as a lingua franca, and English as a global language.

Admittedly, the labels “native speakers” (NSs) and “non-native speakers” (NNSs) have been a cause of concern for years. Hidden beneath the label of NNESTs is the idea of attitudinal problems, for the idea is almost unavoidable that anyone would take “second” as less worthy. The dichotomy of NSs versus NNSs, like majority versus minority relations, is power-driven, identity-laden, and confidence-affecting (Liu, 1999). However, linguistically and pedagogically speaking, recognizing such a difference could be an asset in that those who see themselves as NNESTs can work towards becoming native-like speakers. Individuals who self-identify as NNESTs may choose to do this because they serve as good models as users and teachers. The issue of whether TESOL teachers hold this view to this day

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is in question. Today, some TESOL teachers still want their language learners to be native-like in their proficiency. On the other hand, most have come to realize that native-like proficiency is too ideal and learners should strive for intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability.

Making the Case

While many researchers have touched upon the issues of NNESTs in the field of TESOL, the most prominent and ground-breaking research started in 1996 when George Braine organized a colloquium at that year’s TESOL Convention. During this colloquium, a group of self-identified NNESTs began to express their concerns, debate about the label, and share their own anecdotes from their own professional life. This colloquium inspired many TESOL professionals and has not only led to more research studies, presentations, and publications, but also resulted in the first official organization with TESOL. This organization is called the NNEST Caucus. This NNEST Caucus later emerged as an official interest section (IS) in the TESOL organization and gave NNESTs more prominence and importance in 2008 after the NNEST IS official website was developed.

NNEST research has experienced several phases over the last two decades (Kamhi-Stein, 2004). In the first phase, the self-perceptions of NNESTs were the primary focus. Reves and Medgyes (1994) investigated English teachers’ perceptions in 10 countries by collecting data using a questionnaire from 216 NESTs and NNESTs. Analysis of the data revealed that two-thirds (68%) of the respondents believed that there were differences between NESTs and NNESTs, and the majority (75%) considered NNESTs’ linguistic difficulties to have an adverse effect on their teaching. Reves and Medgyes, in the same article, suggest that exposure to an English-speaking environment and pre-service training with the focus on proficiency might be helpful for NNESTs. Samimi and Brutt-Griffler (1999) investigated self-perceptions of 17 NNESTs (graduate student pre-service TESOL teachers) enrolled on a course in the TESOL program at an American university. The researchers found that the participants’ self-perceptions had become more positive over a period of 10 weeks. This indicates that training and experience in English-speaking countries boosts the confidence of NNESTs dramatically.

The second phase was characterized through studies that focused on the credibility of NNESTs. The qualitative studies in this area often made use of autobiographical narratives (e.g., Liu, 1999). Thomas, for instance, shared her disappointing experience as a teacher being evaluated by her students on the basis of her race, not her teaching performance. Her credibility as a teacher was explicitly challenged by her students, especially one comment, that suggested the class would have been better taught by an NEST. She also noted that not only her students but also her NEST colleagues threatened her confidence. From her experience, she argues that NNESTs’ lack of confidence is the outcome of these overt challenges to credibility. Braine (1999) reflects on the days when he was in
NNESTs graduate school in the United States and explains how the disadvantage of his non-native existence persisted. For instance, an unfortunate treatment he had experienced when he applied for a teaching position in an intensive English program led him to wonder why NNESTs were not appreciated for their diversity and multicultural backgrounds, whereas ESL students were usually praised for what they could bring to the language classroom. Thus, NNESTs’ own experiences as graduate students, teachers, and prospective job candidates in the English-speaking environments not only struck others in the field who could identify themselves with these professionals, but also helped raise more critical issues known to researchers of English teaching.

The third phase of research in this area focuses on how NNESTs are perceived by others, such as administrators and students. Mahboob, Uhrig, Newman, and Hartford (2004) conducted a survey study to shed light on the hiring issues, looking at the NNST-NNEST population ratio in ESL programs in the United States. Data was collected by 122 administrators of intensive English programs (IEP) (with a response rate of 25.5%). Analysis of the data showed only three criteria to be significant: whether one was a native English speaker, recommendation, and teaching experience. Mahboob et al. suggest that IEPs in the United States should reexamine their hiring practices if they seek to offer their students exemplary role models of NNESTs, and to reflect “a realistic and inclusive picture of diversity represented by world Englishes” (p. 116). Moreover, Lasagabaster and Sierra’s (2002) research investigated students’ perceptions of their English teachers using a questionnaire to test four hypotheses based on past NNEST research. They found out that students at all levels (primary, secondary, and college/university) overall showed a higher preference for NESTs. However, students who responded to the survey indicated a preference for NESTs in the area of pronunciation, speaking, vocabulary, and culture and civilization, where NNES teachers were preferred for areas such as learning strategies and grammar.

The fourth phase of research in the NNEST movement is captured in the necessity and need for the divide. Over the last few years, the TESOL NNEST IS has organized a number of panels reflecting on the 20 years of research in this area and prominent researchers and leaders formed panels to reflect and project the future of research in this area. Researchers and NNEST leaders have debated the connections made between the research completed and future research. Researchers have also confirmed the value and need to focus on NNESTs over the last two decades. In addition, they challenged the divide and embraced the unity and collaboration between NNESTs and NESTs as TESOL professionals move forward. Researchers continue to question the way in which NNESTs and NESTs were treated in past years as if they were at the opposite ends of the scale, with definitive characteristics (Kamhi-Stein, 2004). Such a view is no longer supported as it fails to capture the complexities involved in being NNESTs. Rather, the accepted view is now that NESTs and NNESTs both have knowledge, skills, and competences that complement each other. What is needed in TESOL currently is further research about how NESTs and NNESTs can collaborate in their professional development, teaching, and research, so that we can strive to focus more on professional issues that are
consequential for the learning effectiveness of the very students the field teaches and nurtures.

**Pedagogical Implications**

Being a NNEST has many great advantages rather than disadvantages. According to Medgyes (1994), these advantages include the following attributes.

NNESTs are able to:

1. provide a good learner model for imitation;
2. teach language-learning strategies more effectively;
3. supply learners with more information about the English language;
4. anticipate and prevent language difficulties better than NESTs (because they have already experienced language learning from the same background);
5. be more empathetic to the needs and problems of learners; and
6. make use of the learner’s mother tongue.

In addition, Tang (1997) posits that NNESTs may be in a favorable position by being able to predict potential difficulties for the students, and to know how to help them learn based on their own language-learning experiences. Further, NNESTs may share their own learning strategies with students, which highlights the unique contribution NNESTs can make in English classrooms (de Oliveira, 2011). However, because NNESTs possess a relatively limited cultural exposure to experiences and lack authentic input (those who work in non-English-language environments, especially in the developing countries), there are admittedly linguistic and cultural disadvantages for NNESTs in the profession. Therefore, several pedagogical strategies to empower NNESTs are proposed in what follows.

1. **NNEST and NEST collaborations**

NNESTs working collaboratively with native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) in work environments has proven to be a viable model to empower both groups. The collaboration could be in the form of shared reflection journals or relevant narrative exchanges. Although the NNEST and NEST peers may start as passive readers of one another’s concerns, they could later become active respondents (Matsuda, 1999–2000). The participants’ self-awareness as members of a collaborative community not only allowed them to give each other support but also encouraged them to realize their strengths and preferences, thus enabling them to adopt and learn from others’ approaches derived from different linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds (Matsuda, 1999–2000).

NNESTs working with NESTs in the learning community as peers is also a proven long-term relationship that benefits both groups in their professional career. They are recommended to work in a professional friendship, acknowledging one another as a valuable learning resource. Based on their strengths as either an experienced EFL teacher (as a NNEST) or a culture informant (as a NEST), they
can help each other obtain knowledge that reinforced their studies in the field by providing and gaining supportive feedback on their work experiences as well as in the learning processes on a regular basis. This model suggests the importance of pre-service teachers’ understanding, and of implementing collaboration between individuals with different experiences and expertise to form a relationship that is mutually beneficial and long-lasting.

Another model to be recommended here is team-teaching between NNESTs and NESTs. Where possible, team-teaching has become a welcome model for teachers as well as learners. While NNESTs and NESTs can decide which roles they will each play on which occasions, they can complement each other while learners can see communication in action and can also learn from both teachers. NNESTs and NESTs could be encouraged and excited to work with one another while students are receiving the best from both sides—knowledge, skills, and communication (Liu, 2007). Nevertheless, team-teaching needs careful planning and constant reflection on what has been working and what has not, in order to modify the process to maximize the benefits to learning.

2. Developing the social networks of NNESTs

In addition to collaboration between NNESTs and NESTs, the former can also develop networks among themselves to enhance NNESTs’ credibility. Specifically, a mentor relationship can be built up between pre-service/novice and experienced NNESTs. Pre-service/novice NNESTs may seek advice and support from experienced and successful NNESTs, and experienced NNESTs may serve as role models for pre-service/novice NNESTs, sharing their stories and strategies for being successful in the field and encourage behaviors that enhance pre-service/novice NNESTs’ professional preparation and improvement (de Oliveira, 2011).

3. Opportunities for NNESTs to reflect on their beliefs

Language teacher educators (both NNS and NS) should be encouraged to provide systematic opportunities for NNESTs to reflect on their beliefs and attitudes towards the NS myth and self-identity in the English teaching profession. When collaboratively working with teacher educators through pre-designed narrative inquiry, NNESTs can start to reposition themselves in their professional context as qualified English teachers and language users. Although the process of helping NNESTs negotiate their professional identity as legitimate English teachers is complex and varied in context, NNESTs can start to better understand their professional landscape, challenge disempowering ideologies, and identity as legitimate English teachers from social mediation and collaboration.

4. Self-awareness of linguistic and cultural competence

NNESTs need to be aware of their own linguistic and cultural competence as they are aware of their limitations in this area. NNESTs’ self-perception of being less competent in language has prevented many of them from being confident
instructors (Llurda, 2005). Although most NNESTs may never sound like native speakers of English, they can achieve a high level of intelligibility in producing sounds and conducting efficient communication. Further, NNESTs may have a thorough understanding of acculturation since they have been through the process themselves. However, NNESTs’ self-confidence is built upon many variables, from their students, colleagues, mentors, program administrators, and, most importantly, themselves. NNESTs need to put constant effort into their linguistic and cultural competence in English communication in order to achieve self-empowerment and improvement, with the ultimate goal of becoming confident, qualified, and credible English teachers.

Conclusion

Although the issues of NNESTs are not new to the field of TESOL, they are not ones that are easily resolved either. This entry has highlighted some of the major issues that NNESTs face in the field, as well as serving to summarize the history of research in the area of NNESTs’ strengths and weaknesses in the TESOL field. This type of research is still relatively new to the field, and because of this, there is still much to be done if NNESTs are to be seen as credible and confident teachers of English. This type of research is needed for NESTs as well because they benefit from being aware of the divide between themselves and NNESTs. Both NNESTs and NESTs become better teachers when they constantly reflect on the strengths and weaknesses they bring to the classroom and work to constantly improve. Finally, without research that highlights the pedagogical implications, the field would be left devoid of practical applications for best practice in collaboration methods between NNESTs and NESTs.

SEE ALSO: Advocacy; Agency and Marginalization; Collaboration and Collaborative Practices; Globalization, English Language Teaching, and Teachers; Myths and Misconceptions About the NNEST Movement and Research; Native-Speakerism; NNEST Lens: Implications and Directions; NNEST Movement; Teacher Qualifications, Professionalism, Competencies, and Benchmarks

References


