Critical Perspectives on Native and Non-Native English Speakers

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Abstract. This study investigates some perspectives on Native and Non-Native English speakers in critical way. This is done through qualitative content analysis of these two notion in English language teaching (hereafter ELT). The study begins with an overall presentation of Native and Non-Native English speakers in the perspectives of distinctions, notions and roles. It goes to an evaluation of ideologies. The remainder of the paper is dedicated to discussion of the results. The study tries to offer an alternative way of classifying English speakers and teachers.

1. Introduction

The United Kingdom, as the super powerful colonist in the world and the first country that launched the industrial revolution, has placed the greatest influences on the world, which made their native language, English, once an imperialist language and now a language used the most widely in the world. In other words, the whole world has been learning English for several centuries, either because they have been being colonized by UK or because they wanted to learn about the advanced technologies from UK or some other reasons. However, after such a long period of study, differences in the average quality of English proficiency distinguish one country from another. Some experts owed such a phenomenon to the idea of ELT (English Language Teaching). To put it simple, in some people’s assumption, English teachers are divided into two groups. One is the Native English-Speaking Teachers (NEST), mainly from such countries as North America, UK, Australia, New Zealand, etc.; the other is Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (NNEST), most of whom learned English in a non-English cultural background (David Crystal, 2003). By contrast, some are not in favor of such an idea. As a result, in different countries, there are differences in ELT policy, mode and efficiency.

Therefore, it raises many questions and doubts in terms of superiority of Native speakers and inferiority of Non-native speakers. For instance, what are the notion and the role of N-NEST and NEST in ELT? In other words, what do people mean by native and non-native speakers? Why do people assume these things? Is it necessary to make such a distinction based on people’s assumption? If not, what are the alternative ways to categorize English speakers and teachers? This essay is going to cope with these questions. And we may figure out the answers through the following analysis.

2. Analysis of the Distinction between Native and Non-native Speakers

As Mesthrie and Bhatt (2008: 36) observe, “the distinction between a native and non-native speaker of English -- long taken for granted in linguistics -- is being increasingly called into question in World English research” (Jenkins, 2009: 87). Here we begin with another two related notions, i.e. “New Englishes” and “new Englishes”. The former one refers to “English” which was learnt as second language in India, Philippine, Singapore etc. while the latter one refers to “English” which was learnt primarily in the territories once colonized by Britain, such as North America, Australia, and South Africa. These two varieties of English already have their own positions, although they are different from the native variety. However, nowadays, there is a similar situation in Expanding Circle countries such as China, Japan, and Korea etc, since English is learnt as foreign language.
Therefore, the two groups, being Native and Non-native speakers of English are assumed by some people.

2.1 The Notion of Native and Non-native Speakers

One impact of the globalization of English is that more and more people come into the program of EFLT (English as Foreign Language Teaching), which makes the English speakers two camps, especially in Expanding Circle countries. Then there are the two notions of Native and Non-native speakers.

The term “native speakers” refers to the people who consider English as their native language. Meanwhile, native language means “the language a person acquires in early childhood because it is spoken in family and/or it is the language of the country where he or she is living” (Richard: 241). By contrast, the term “non-native speakers” refers to the people who speak English as a foreign or second language. Kachru (1985) has proposed three concentric circles of English to describe the distribution and usage of English around the world. The Inner Circle includes the countries which treat English as a native language, such as, Britain, America, Canada, Australia, Ireland, etc. The Outer Circle includes the countries which treat English as a second language or an official language, such as, India, Malaysia, Singapore, South Africa, Philippines, etc. The Expanding Circle includes those countries which regard English as a foreign language, such as China, Japan, Republic of Korea, Russia, etc. People of those countries belonging to the outer circle and expanding circle are non-native speakers.

2.2 The Role of Native and Non-native Speakers in ELT

As the longstanding definition, native speakers and non-native speakers have been used to categorize the users of English into three groups as mentioned in 2.1. Thus, different countries developed different ELT policy according to the group such a distinction puts them into, which brought about both negative and positive results. In this part, we are going to set four Asian countries as an example.

Good examples of negative results are China and Japan, both of which are Expanding Circle countries. China and Japan have not impacted directly by the social ideology or traditional customs of the UK or other countries whose native language is English, so they always view themselves as the non-native speakers. In this way they may assume that they are inferior to the native speakers in English proficiency and talent, which decided, to a great extent, what and how they learn English. This also results in many problems in ELT, such as greatly emphases on the language grammar rather than the language skills, the exam-oriented policy, lack of unified teaching material, dumb English and deaf English. In a word, once they have treated themselves as the non-native speakers, they tended to take English as a foreign language, or even merely a subject, instead of a communication tool with culture essence. As a result, since the end of 19th century when the Hundred Days of Reform in China and the Meiji Reform in Japan took place, people in these two countries have been misusing such a distinction. That is to say, for almost 100 years, they have treated the white color people as the native English speakers, only from whom can they learn about the real English language, the real English culture and the real advanced technologies.

In terms of positive results, we would like to discuss about the ELT in Singapore and Malaysia, both of which are Outer Circle countries. Compared with China and Japan, Singapore and Malaysia, as the countries that have been colonized by UK, show us a different picture in the ELT. Since they have been ruled by UK for over two score years and over one hundred years respectively, the Singaporean and Malaysian have experienced the British culture and traditional customs for a pretty long period, and they, in some degree, are “native speakers”.

In Singapore, the ELT system, especially the bilingual education program, is well developed. In more details, grammars and textbooks are rarely involved in ELT. Instead, they tend to subscribe some reading materials, such as National Geography, News Week and Readers’ Digest. In this way, students’ language sense and language proficiency can be well and solidly developed. Likewise, in Malaysia, English is a dominated and prevailed language in every walk of life, from business to politics, and from formal conversation to daily chatting. What’s more, the former Prime Minister
Mahathir proposed a special education policy, namely, Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik Dalam Bahasa Inggeris (PPSMI), the teaching and learning of science and mathematics in English.

Remarkable as the benefits the distinction brought to Singapore and Malaysia, problems still can be found. For example, Singapore’s sophisticated ELT mode, on the one hand, helps to train the high-quality talents; however, on the other hand, it also deprives a number of students from the access to higher education. The Malaysia’s PPSMI, though has achieved noticeable achievements, encountered great resistance because it is unworkable in many areas, such as the remote rural schools.

From the development of ELT in the Outer Circle, Singapore and Malaysia, and in the Expanding Circle, China and Japan, we can draw a conclusion that it is neither useful nor practical to take English speakers as native speakers or non-native speakers.

2.3 Reasons for the Distinction

As the analyses above indicated, the distinction attributed to many factors.

In the first place, ELT was originally used as an instrument of colonization in many foreign countries, such as India and Africa. As a colonialism Empire, Britain trained the native ‘elites’ to help govern the colonies, and taught the English Literature to the people out of Britain. However, such kind of English education for the ‘natives’ is limited and exclusive. That is to say, the distinction between native and non-native is also a distinction of the social status. Therefore, being a native English speaker is the access to upward mobility in society in the colonies, such as in Singapore.

Secondly, English was introduced partly for its ‘civilizing effect’ (Kachru: 2005). For instance, In China, the Christian missionary work, as part of ‘self-strengthening movement’ of 1860s, is treated as one main starting point for educated English. It also means the native English speaker is superior to the non-native, so the non-native insists that only from the native can they learn about the essence of civilization.

3. People’s Current Ideas to English Teachers and Our Discussion

Since English learning becomes prevailing worldwide, especially in Outer Circle countries and Expanding Circle countries. Apart from the official schools treating English as a compulsory course, there are also many English language training institutions. In China, such kind of famous English training schools have dominated big market, such as New Oriental, New Channel, Web and so forth. They commonly apply similar advertisement with a photo of foreign images. These images are usually white, good-looking and native English speakers. What’s more, those training schools are keen on hiring white native speakers as teachers, most of whom come from America, UK. The parents are willing to pay large sum of money to invite these teacher to teach oral English to their kids, while they show no interest in the teachers from Philippine or so who also have good command of English. In other words, people have equalled the express “native speakers” with “white”, which leads to the fact that many “Non-native speakers” are refused in English teaching jobs even though they have achieved bilingual status as fluent, proficient users. However, it is doubtful of the Native speakers’ roles being English teachers or just the living examples of American or British way of life.

Therefore, it is significant to discuss the following questions. Are Native speakers equal to Standard English speakers? Who are the real good English language teachers?

3.1 Standard English in English Language Teaching

Standard English is the term used for that variety of a language which is considered to be the norm. It is the variety held up as the optimum for educated purposes and used as yardstick against which other varieties of the language are measured. Being a prestige variety, a standard language is spoken by a minority of people within a society, typically those occupying positions of power (Jenkins: 33). In other words, Standard English is the language of the educated people who have achieved a high
level of expertise in English. In this regard, Native speakers are not equal to Standard English
speakers.

Under the circumstance of globalization, English has been widely used throughout the world. It
has become the main language in various domains, such as education, science, business etc. However, in turn, English also presents varieties with the influence of different elements. Therefore, “the standardization of English had major ramification for the construction of the discourse of EIL (English as an international language), especially when we consider English that an equation between Standard English and the dominant international language was seen as an inevitable historical process” (Pennycook, 1994: 117). Thus, the whole world is learning Standard English and we are eager for the teachers who can speak Standard English.

3.2 The Answer for the Real Good English Teachers

English teachers inevitably play crucial role in English language acquisition. However, it remains a question of the definition of good English language teachers. A native English speaker does not mean a good English teacher, although they have good English proficiency. But the condition of good English language teachers is more than that.

First of all, one must know how to teach. Without language learning experience and teaching
skills, one can hardly teach and become a good teacher when we consider the teachers’ great
influence on the students. English teachers should know the puzzle their students undergo, which makes them better understand the students and think in different angles. It is rather significant for English language teachers to be an accomplished user of English rather than take advantage as native speakers. In contrast, non-native English speakers have been through the process of learning English and they are able to share their own experience with the students.

Another important factor is that good English teachers should acquire cultural background with comparative perspective to the target language and culture. Take China as an example. Compared with native English speaking teachers, Chinese English teachers have a better understanding of Chinese language and culture when teachers present the language similarities and cultural differences. It is easier to connect with their students. And they are able to deliver language acquisition based on their own experience.

Enthusiasm and passion for teaching is undoubtedly, an indispensable element to be a good
teacher. Apart from strong ability of instructing and communicating in English or commanding
knowledge in various respects, the teachers should have all-round passion and enthusiasm for
teaching. Even native English speaking teachers cannot be regarded as good teachers if they are unwilling to improve their enthusiasm in teaching. On the contrary, non-native English speakers can be better teachers if they conform to the conditions above and carry on improving their teaching skills.

Therefore, it is the elements mentioned above that constitute the trait of a good English teacher,
which totally destroys the illusion that only native English speakers can truly teach English well.

Besides, Andreasson pointed out, “In the expanding Circle, the ideal goal is to imitate the native
speaker of the standard language as closely as possible…It would, therefore, be far from a
compliment to tell a Spanish person that his or her variety is Spanish English. It would imply that
his or her acquisition of the language left something to be desired” (1994:402). Meanwhile, since
the majority of people are multilingual, they can speak different languages based on different
situation. Moreover, it can be difficult to judge their first language, second language and so forth.
Under the circumstance of English as a Lingua Franca, English speakers (even in Expanding Circle
countries) have formed their own lingua franca English, so it makes no sense to have the distinction
between Native and Non-native speakers.

4. The Alternative Ways of Classifying English Speakers and Teachers

As concluded above, grouping the speakers of English into native and non-native, especially in ELT,
is long taken for granted but not useful. The misuse of such an unpractical way, if we can say so,
has been observed by Rampton. As an alternative way, Rampton classified English speakers into
three groups: Monolingual English speaker (MES), Bilingual English speaker (BES) and Non-bilingual speaker (NBES) (Jenkins:90). Rampton’s way of classifying to some extent stresses much on the linguistic competence. It is safe to say his way is of course workable but somewhat partial. Therefore, before figuring out the feasible alternative ways, we should first of all find out the keys to the following question: What should be taught & learnt?

As to this question, the celebrated linguist Sapir has argued that language is the carrier of culture and that culture impacts on language in every single aspect, including pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and language use. That is to say, what should be taught and learnt in ELT are not only the pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar, but also the language use and the culture of the language. Thus, it is not always the case that the native speakers can help in English language teaching and learning, because not all of them are experts in both language knowledge and the traditional culture of the English. Oppositely, non-native speakers have a better understanding of English culture through their way of gaining a new language. Besides, based on the discussion in 3, it is the Standard English that should be universally taught and learnt, especially for the students of English as a foreign or second language. Since English has its varieties, native English speakers are not the native speakers of Standard English.

Thus, having clarified what we are going to teach and learn in ELT, we can easily identify WHO we should learn English from. The answer seems quite simple. That is the native speakers of Standard English who are proficient in English and are well informed of the culture of English.

Therefore, we can put forward another alternative way based on the proposal of Rampton. To some extent, it is complement to Rampton’s proposal.

We replace Native with MES (Monolingual English Speaker). To be more specific, MES consists of MSES (Monolingual Standard English Speaker) and MNES (Monolingual Non-standard English Speaker), both of which can be subdivided into two groups. One is the ones who are master of English grammar and culture; the other is who are not. Meanwhile, we also replace Non-native with BES (Bilingual English Speaker). Regardless of the order of which language, L1 or L2, is acquired first, we can also subdivide BES into two groups. One is the BES with fluent Standard English, excellent understanding of English grammar and culture; the other is the BES who is only proficient in either Standard English or English grammar or culture.

By far, we have figured out specifically from whom we should learn about the real English. It is the MSES who are master of English grammar and culture, and the BES with fluent Standard English and excellent understanding of English grammar and culture.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this essay explored the distinction between native and non-native English speakers, concentrating on whether it is meaningful to make such a distinction and which is better in language teaching with reference to the context of both Outer Circle countries and Expanding Circle Countries.

Currently, English teachers are still demanding under the circumstances of globalization. What really makes sense is not whether they are native or non-native speakers, but whether they are good teachers. As to those so-called “native English teachers”, there is still a long way to go to be qualified teachers, except to be advantaged as native speakers, since Philipson points out that monolingual English speakers are depriving themselves of a great deal of linguistic and cultural sensitivity if they are confined to the worldview of a single language, however widespread and varied this language is. In this regard, they have to gain more skills and knowledge to be qualified English teachers.

Good English teachers should have both learning experience of English and target language proficiency in a certain country, which is easier for them to communicate with the students and think in both angles. Especially in the Expanding countries, it is advisable to reform the way of recruiting English teachers as well as modifying people’s ideas toward good English teachers.
References


