

Journal of NELTA Forum

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Non-native English Speaking Teacher (NNEST) and their Delivery

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Abstract

This article attempts to display the characteristics of the non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) and focuses on the need for the transition of their potentialities in various circumstances of their career. It also describes some of the issues related to their shared difficulties and insecurities, and uncovers the strategies that help them to build up their mind and vision. The non-native speakers of English are definitely in a strong position as teachers in that they can use their experiences to bring quality to teaching and become more effective speakers of English. In addition, the article highlights the non-native speakers of English scenario with the intention to promote further in-depth research on this unexplored area of “nonnativesness.” The article also makes a brief description of the problems the Nepali NNESTs face in their classroom delivery processes and discusses ways to overcome them.

Keywords: NNESTs, Proficiency, Fallacy, Nativeness, Delivery

Introduction

NNEST (/ [nɛnɪst/ en-NEST) is an acronym that refers to the growing body of English language teachers who speak English as a foreign or second language. An NNEST is obviously one whose mother tongue is not English. Moreover, an NNEST is a teacher who works in an EFL environment and who speaks the same native language as his or her students (Medgyes, 2001). However, Medgyes writes that the language proficiency of an NNEST is the “bookish” one. He/she speaks poorer English and

tends to focus on accuracy, not fluency. Nowadays, definitions of native speaker and non-native speaker are outdated. Many people today are bilingual and speak two languages or more proficiently. Non-native speakers have learned English in a classroom, and so are more equipped to teach to others. There are several issues raised related to NNESTs which are of interest to all today. They have attracted the attention of language teachers, language specialists, teacher educators, and graduate students from all over the world.

In second/foreign language education, teachers come from a myriad of backgrounds such as native English speaking teachers (NEST) and NNESTs. Ebata (2008) balances the two by saying that NNESTs are able to prove that they are as capable of teaching as NESTs, and are able to alter the students' behaviors toward them. Needless to say, "NESTs were the panacea for all their language ills" (Kiczkowiak, 2014). Moreover, NESTs can teach their cultures, values, and histories related to the target language. Oprea (2010) also talks about them: "NNESTs tend to be a lot more knowledgeable grammar-wise whereas NESTs have the upper hand when it comes to vocabulary and pronunciation." Oprea (ibid) goes on saying, "NNESTs have a lot of opportunities to become more proficient in the language through the effective use of the technology that is available these days."

Kekir and Demir (2013) writes, "There is a widespread prejudice that NNESTs often lack linguistic command in order to be proficient English teachers..." In other words, there is a remarkable campaign and bias against NNESTs, only because they are not NESTs. Kekir and Demir continue, "There's still a global prejudice against NNESTs. Especially in recruitment issues in ELT field, despite the worthy effort made by TESOL and some other institutions against unfair hiring practices, employers still have a positive bias in favour of NESTs." However, accepting such bias of favouritism of NESTs against NNESTs, we are required to explain the language proficiencies of NNESTs and suggest ways to overcome the deficiencies noticed during the process of transition from their mother tongue to English.

Hypotheses

This article seeks to build upon the following hypotheses:

- i) Native English speaking teachers (NESTs) are better in all language abilities, but non-native English speakers (NNESTs) are more practised in relation to their students through their shared difficulties and insecurities.
- ii) NNESTs are at an advantage in teaching English in many ways.
- iii) A strength of NNESTs is not only their ability to predict their students' difficulties, but also to estimate their potential.
- iv) Only NNESTs can serve as models of what a successful learner should be.

How are NNESTs Characterized?

An NNEST possesses a number of features. According to Medgyes (1999), NNESTs are characterized by the fact that English is their second or foreign language, their students are monolingual groups of learners, they work in an EFL environment, they speak poorer English, they use "bookish" language and more L1, and they speak the same native language as their students. Likewise, Medgyes (1994) says that there are several assumptions associated with NEST and NNEST groups of teachers: first, NESTs and NNESTs differ with regard to their English language proficiency, and secondly, the discrepancy in their English language proficiency accounts for most of the differences in their teaching behaviours. Suarez (2000), in his article entitled "'Native' and 'Non-native',"

states that it is not only a question of terminology, supporting this with his argument that “Anything following the negative prefix *non* is bound to be negative. It seems unfair, to say the least, to group into a *non-* category the vast majority of English teachers in the world (according to reliable estimates approximately 90% of English language teachers are not L1 speakers of English).”

In the same way, NNESTs possess many other features. An NNEST uses English less confidently. He/she does not place emphasis on language use, but he/she is more insightful, and his/her grammar is typically very strong. However, we should better know that an ideal NNEST is the one who has achieved near-native proficiency in English (Medgyes, 1994). Moreover, an NNEST is stricter and assigns more homework.

NNESTs and their Strengths

In the field of English language teaching (ELT), a growing number of teachers are not native speakers of English. There are many ways in which nonnative teachers are at an advantage in teaching English. Phillipson (1996), for example, points out that nonnative speakers can learn to use idioms appropriately, to appreciate the cultural connotations of the language, and to determine whether a given language form is correct.

NNESTs’ strengths cannot be underestimated. Rosie (n.d.) writes that the strengths of these individuals as ESL teachers are still somewhat unknown and are often underestimated by their colleagues and students. In relation to this, Simpson (2015) views that the non-native teachers are certainly not worse and should

therefore be given the same employment opportunities in ELT as NESTs are. Phillipson (1996) seems to be inclined to the NNESTs’ side. By means of the phrase “the native speaker fallacy,” he also talks about unfair treatment of qualified NNESTs being used throughout the ELT field. Many authors, including Simpson (2015), have shown evidence that the students are very much aware of and have started to appreciate NNESTs for their teaching skills rather than basing their opinions on negative stereotypes. This we can notice from Oprea’s (2010) writing: “.. NNESTs tend to be a lot more knowledgeable grammar-wise...” Moreover, Filho (2002, cited in Ebata 2008) states that “a big strength NNSs have is being able to not only predict their students’ difficulties, but also to estimate their potential.”

Simpson (2015) sums up there is no doubt that NESTs can be good English teachers and that they have many strengths. However, so do NNESTs, and we hope that the ELT hiring practices will soon start to reflect the fact that the mother tongue neither makes nor breaks an English teacher. Because the ideal situation, the best of both worlds, for any language school, as well as for the students, is to have both NESTs and NNESTs.

However, the native speaker fallacy has created a number of challenges with which NNESTs must contend in the workplace and in their daily lives. Although the majority of English teachers in the world are not native speakers of English, NNESTs struggle for equal treatment in the ELT profession. They face a number of challenges, including those related to accent and credibility in the workplace. Overall, a lot more

research needs to be conducted in order to find out what students actually want from their teachers. Evidences show that students do not have clear preference either for NESTs or NNESTs.

NNESTs in Great Advantages

NNESTs have a great advantage. They are not only better in providing learner models but also can teach language-learning strategies more effectively. They utilize this proficiency to claim they are more sensitive to their students. They have amassed a wealth of knowledge and deeper understanding of the prevalent circumstances which have made them able to supply more information about the English language. The deeper insights to dig into what is easy and difficult in the learning process have also made them more responsive to the students' needs. Despite all this, sometimes, NNESTs are in stress. Medgyes (1992) argues that "non-native speakers can never achieve a native speaker's competence (cited in Walkinshaw & Duong, 2012, p. 2)," and their 1 ELT research findings are indeed full of challenges. However, non-native English speakers need not instantly worry; instead, they will be known for being ideal NNESTs. Medgyes (1994) defines an ideal NNEST as the one who has achieved near-native proficiency in English. Next, Medgyes has not talked about the parameters that can really assess the native speaker's competence. Non-native speakers are no less competent than native speakers in their delivery strategies.

Moreover, the research findings suggest that NNESTs have, to some extent, a negative impression for all their language abilities compared to NESTs; however, their teaching changes the students' attitude

towards them. Ebata (2008), in his "Nonnativeness," writes that NNESTs prove that they are capable of teaching as professionally as NESTs, and their non-nativeness becomes a nonfactor in a language class.

Scenario of Non-native Speakers and English Language Learners

The following facts present a rather remarkable scenario.

"English has become the second language of everybody...It's gotten to the point where almost in any part of the world to be educated means to know English" (Mydans, 2007, *Across Cultures, English is the Word*, para. 14).

"The number of English language learners worldwide is up to 1.5 billion" (Knagg 2014, cited in Bentley, 2014, *Billion English Learners Worldwide*, para. 2).

"In 2015, out of the total 195 countries in the world, 67 nations have English as the primary language of 'official status'. Plus, there are also 27 countries where English is spoken as a secondary 'official' language" (Shubnell 2017, June 2, *Languages*, para. 3).

"Non-native speakers of English now outnumber native speakers by a ratio of 3-1" (Crystal, 2003, cited in Power, *Not the Queen's English*, 2005, para. 4).

We are closing in on three billion English speakers in the world, and the overwhelming majority of them are not native speakers. The situation of growing number of non-native speakers is beyond the level of imagination. It is interesting to note that the number of non-native English

speakers nearly doubles the number of native English speakers, making it the world's most learned and spoken foreign language (Ceo, 2016). It is the language of globalization, international business, politics and diplomacy. It is the language of computers and the Internet. It is everywhere. Johnson (2009, p. 131) writes that a billion are learning it, about a third of the world's population are in some sense exposed to it, and by 2050, it is predicted half the world will be more or less proficient in it.

Will the native English speakers be able to handle these billions of learners of English who have come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds? The responsibility of NNESTs tomorrow cannot be imagined; they will be overloaded! Even 'non-nativeness' can be a subject worthy of study. Medgyes (2001, p. 441) rightly says, "The study of the NNEST remains overall a largely unexplored area in language education." There are some thoughts and feelings about this potential subject to be explored and discussed consciously and with greater interest.

It's an open subject, a new area that the whole world can concentrate their research on. Since there are millions of NNESTs in the world, an infinite amount of research can be carried out on these precious teachers and their professionalism!

NNESTs Delivery

NNESTs can relate to their students through their shared difficulties and insecurities. But still many of them face the insecurity of not being fluent enough to teach English. Therefore, it is suggested to genuinely study the following observations made on the teaching English methodology

adapted by some Nepali speaking teachers of English in their classroom English practices.

From Mother Tongue to Other Tongue?

We are definitely moving from our mother tongue to the foreign tongue! During this process of transition, Nepali speaking teachers of English face numerous problems. It is found that many teachers in Nepal are still facing challenges in the lesson delivery process. Regarding this, Khatri (2016) in a NELTA editorial writes, "Fresh university graduates who have successfully completed pre-service teacher education program have been unable to deliver English lesson really effectively though having authorized license to teach." Now that the teacher is full-fledged with the theory and experiences, it is his/her primary responsibility to seriously deliver the content through language, the English language.

The English language teaching situation is just beyond our expectation and is pitiable. It is quite common that there is excessive use of the mother tongues such as Bhojpuri in Birgunj, and Maithili in Janakpur, along with Nepali throughout the educational institutions of the country. However, we will not find the Newari speaking teachers of English in the country, even in the Kathmandu valley, teaching English through Newari! Called upon for the reason for using mother tongues while teaching English, Nepali/Maithili/Bhojpuri speaking teachers of English simply use the logic that the students' foundation of English is very weak; they don't understand English when they teach through English.

Now, the issue of whether or not to use the mother tongue (L1) in the English language (L2) classroom is complex. In his book *Teaching Monolingual Classes*, Atkinson (1993) talks about “a careful, limited use of L1” to help students get maximum benefit from activities which in other respects will be carried out in the target language.

A Nepali speaker of English should, however, think that his mother tongue and the target language are two different and significantly distinct languages. When you teach English through one of your mother tongues, you will be accomplishing your job only from your side. You should think over what the consequences would be on the other side!

Shift from Syllable Timing Delivery to Stress Timing Delivery

Nepali is a syllable-timed language whose syllables take approximately equal amounts of time to pronounce. In Nepali language (as in Hindi and French for example), the distance between one syllable and another is always equal. It sounds as though Nepali speakers of English are stressing EV-ER-Y SY-LLA-BLE E-QUA-LLY. Compared with English which is a heavily stress-timed language and where there is approximately the same amount of time between stressed syllables, Nepali learners often have problems recognising and then producing complicated features of English. In this regard, the meaning in the quote, “learners whose first language can be described as syllable-timed often have problems recognising and then producing features of English such as contractions, main and secondary stress, and elision,” is seriously worth keeping in mind ([sites.google.com](https://www.google.com)). In these unlikely situations between two languages, the teacher must pay attention

to the intricacies of English rhythm and prosody; English is, after all, a most difficult language for non-native speakers of English, including Nepali native speakers.

Stress patterns and rhythm does not mean much in Nepali, as is the case in Indo-Aryan languages. There are some universal characteristics of the Indo-Aryan languages including Nepali, such as all of them have aspirated stops, both voiced and voiceless. However, Nepali speakers should not quit the fact that aspiration is phonemic in Nepali, cf. [p^h], [t^h], [k^h] – phonetic in English and [ph], [th] and [kh], phonemic in Nepali.

Most people speak English without caring about stress, rhythm and intonation, yet their communication is very much appreciated unless it hinders in comprehending the message. In written English, these suprasegmental features do not pose any problem while shifting from syllable-timing delivery to stress-timing delivery, but it is most essential in spoken English. If we claim we are teachers of English, we must follow all the stress patterns and prosody which are prevalent in the English language. And this could be a most uncomfortable job for every Nepali learner of English! This also might be a hindrance in automaticity and in word recognition but increase fluency while speaking.

Fluency Matters in English

Strictly speaking “fluent” in relation to speech means only that it flows smoothly and easily. However, “fluent” is the highest level when describing someone’s English ([English.stackexchange.com](https://www.english.stackexchange.com), 2017).

Fluency in a language means speaking easily, reasonably quickly and without

having to stop and pause a lot, but fluent in a language can take many years. Of course, non-native speakers also speak fluent English. Crystal (2006) clarifies this by saying, “Just look at the amount of non-native speakers who work at our English school in London, but speak fluent English” (How Many People in the World Speak English? para. 7).

Whatsoever, fluency is the beauty of communication in English. One example is “*She spoke in beautiful English,*” which means a very high standard, excellent English. Therefore, fluency matters in English. Fluency, an act of delivering information quickly but with expertise, requires ‘automaticity’, ‘prosody’ and ‘accuracy’ as the three essential components.

Non-native speakers of English, including Nepali learners of English, have problems in keeping up with fluency in speech. Therefore, you are as far as possible required to maintain the following components of fluency:

Automaticity might require practicing English a lot. Ford (n.d.) writes, “Automaticity is usually measured as reading rate or the number of words a student reads per minute (WPM). You can measure rate at the same time that you assess a student’s reading accuracy.”

Prosody is frequently heard in discussions of fluency. Prosody refers to the appropriate use of intonation and phrasing in reading. Ford (ibid) explains prosodic reading as “an act of paying attention to punctuation signs like commas and periods, assigning appropriate stress to individual words within a sentence, and raising or lowering voice intonation...”

Accuracy refers to the percentage of words a reader can read correctly in a given text. Measuring accuracy allows teachers to choose texts at an appropriate difficulty level for each student.

Overall, a fluent reader reads with accuracy, automaticity and prosody.

Rules not Matching Speech

Nepali speakers of English have studied the *prosody* of English—rhythm, stress and intonation. Regarding this, there is a relationship between stress and vowel quality; where a syllable is unstressed, it receives a schwa vowel [Y] or sometimes one of the weak monophthongs /j/, or /u/ or very rarely some vowels other than [Y], [j] and [u]. Likewise, in rhythm, function words are pronounced quickly with a low pitch because in a connected speech they are considered less important. In intonation, one of the stressed syllables receives rising tone, not that in rising intonation you pronounce the final syllable in the sentence with rising tone. But in practice, they have been unable to match the rules learnt with their speech. For example, “Is it impor*tant?”

For example, one is reasonably sure that in the phrase, “I mean to say,” to *rhythmicise* it, one has to stress only the content words in it. But in speech, Nepali speakers make ‘I’ and ‘to’ strong as well, thereby resulting into [‘aj ‘min *tu ‘sej] which implies the stress (word or sentence) rules not matching speech.

This must have been guided by the Nepali stress rules. Acharya (1991) writes, “.. the phonetic stress in Nepali words occurs on the word-initial syllable, if the syllables are equal weight, ... (p. 43).” For example, /

'ka:ka:/ [2-2] 'uncle'. Moreover, Acharya (ibid, p. 46) writes, "Depending on the emphasis on a specific part of the message, the word initial syllable of any of the four words of the sentence /ma a:ja ghara ja:nna/ 'I do not go home today' can be stressed."

Stress. 'Syllable': [ÈsjlYb(Y)l] not [Èsjl[bCEl] (notice while you make [-l[-] and [-bCE-] louder, you are not stressing the first syllable.

Intonation. In spite of the primary stress (which) falls on [-ÈpT] and your pitch rises on it, you rather say [jɪmpT*Ètænt], with the strong vowel final [æ] thereby resulting into a syllable stressed. This is to say that your rules are not matching your speech again.

Conclusion

Non-native speakers of English, including Nepali learners are in fifty-fifty positions. *English* is the most highly commodified language at present and the *English* language teaching and testing industry is a multibillion-dollar global enterprise (Mathews-Aydinli (ed.), p. 54). Therefore, they need professionally and personally to prepare to perform the demanding task of educating others. They should seriously practice good models of pronunciation and correct language use. Their delivery should reveal significant implications for classroom teaching practice and teacher professional development. Most importantly, they should work for facilitating the network of NNESTs so that they can develop their communities. Moreover, they should keep on encouraging native English speakers to join the NNEST issues that affect everyone in the profession of teaching.

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