

“I was refused an ELT job for being non-native”-- An Insight into the Native Speaker Ideology in ELT

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Abstract- *In English language teaching (ELT), compared with non-native English speaker English teachers (NNESTs), native English speaker teachers (NESTs) seemingly gain prominence and are often taken for granted as better English teachers for non-native speaker students, which is described as the native speaker ideology (NS ideology) in this area. In foregoing research of this issue, much attention has been paid to the comparison of NESTs and NNESTs, or students' perceptions on NESTs and NNESTs, while studies having a general picture of the NS ideology are scant. On the basis of literature review, the paper is attempted to have an overall picture of the NS ideology in ELT, with a focus on its causes, its effects on English teaching and learning, and its irrational aspects. In the end, corresponding implications for English teaching and learning are proposed based on the foregoing discussions.*

Keywords- *Native Speaker Ideology (NS Ideology); Causes; Effects; Irrational Aspects*

1. INTRODUCTION

The term “native speaker” refers to one who acquires a language in a nature setting from childhood and is able to use it in a fluent, grammatical and appropriate way (Crystal 2003a; Richard & Richard, 2002). As an owner of the language, a native speaker tend to be the guardian of the language standards (Jenkins, 2000) and should seemingly gain prominence compared with a non-native speaker. The fact, however, is that the issue of whether Native English Speaker Teachers (NESTs) or Non-native English Speaker Teachers (NNESTs) are more suitable for English language teaching (ELT) has been debated for decades, and many researchers have been looking into this issue (e.g. Cook, 1999, 2000; Medgyes, 1992).

In the job market of English teaching, a native speaker is, more often than not, preferred to a non-native speaker, even if the former is not so well trained or qualified as the latter (Cook, 2000). For example, in the Hong Kong job hunting website called cpjobs, over 150 out of 232 job advertisements for teaching English are hiring NESTs instead of NNESTs (<http://www.cpjobs.com/hk/SearchJobs?keyword=english+teacher&sopt=2>; last assessed on June 6, 2018). This situation is rather similar to what Mahboob (2005) has described at the beginning of the 21st century, according to whom, many young bright and qualified Asians with a Master's degree in TESOL or Applied Linguistics struggled in employment thanks to their status as non-native speakers-- they were treated like “step-children”. NESTs are taken for granted as better English teachers for non-native speaker students, and this “common-sense assumption” (Tollefson, 1991) can be defined as the native speaker ideology (NS ideology) in ELT. It is also one of the five basic tenets in ELT reported by the University of

Makerere in a conference held in 1961 by the British Council (Phillipson, 1992a).

In previous research, much attention has been paid to the comparison of NESTs and NNESTs (e.g. Phillipson, 1992a), or students' perceptions on NESTs and NNESTs (e.g. Chang & Chang, 2012; Cheng, 2009). But quite a few studies aim to have a general picture of the NS ideology, which can provide in-service teachers, learners, or decision-makers with some basic knowledge of this issue and hence help them eliminate misconceptions.

Based on literature search, the paper is intended to have an overall picture of the NS ideology in ELT. It firstly focuses on the causes of the NS ideology, exploring its connection with some second language acquisition (SLA) theories, and then discusses its effects on English teaching and learning. In addition, it questions the NS ideology, and reveals that NESTs and NNESTs both have opportunities to be good English teachers. Finally, implications for English teaching and learning are put forward according to the foregoing discussions.

2. CAUSES OF THE NS IDEOLOGY

The centralized role of the NS ideology in ELT and SLA derived from the use of “native speaker” norm as the goal of second language (L2) learners in SLA research (Mahboob, 2005). One basis of this notion is rooted in the works of the Noam Chomsky, particularly in his “idealized native speaker” theory (1965, 1986a, 1986b). Selinker (1969, 1972) proposed the concept of “interlanguage” and “fossilization”, substantiating and supporting Chomsky's prototype of “idealized native speaker”. The former defines a L2 speaker's output prior to full acquisition of the target language, while the latter means the non-learning status of the target language norm. These two

terminologies imply that the ultimate task of L2 learning is to become “native”, and therefore privilege the native speaker. Another example is Long’s (1981, p.275) stress on native speakers’ role in providing ideal language input. According to him, “participation in conversation with NS... is the necessary and sufficient condition for SLA”. Such theories have fallen into the comparative fallacy (Bley-Vroman, 1983, as cited in Cook, 1999) explicitly associating a L2 learner with a native speaker, and have contributed to a general belief that “nativeness” is the prominent goal of L2 learning and native speakers are the unique ones who can serve as perfect models, which gradually gave authority to native speakers in ELT and SLA.

Since being “native” has become people’s persistent pursuit of L2 learning, “accent”, the most important reference for the “nativeness” of a language (at least from some people’s perspective), could never be ignored, which is so powerful as to create discrimination or stereotypes among them in a society (Lippi-Green, 1997), or a measurement of success. For instance, Cheng (2009) conducted a research on 134 Taiwanese primary students’ perceptions on and attitudes towards English accents. The result showed that those who preferred to be taught by NESTs held a belief that native-like accent (especially the American accent) really matters for an English teacher. Earlier in 2006, Moussu studied 25 Intensive English Programme administrators’ perceptions on the pros and cons of NESTs and NNESTs, and interestingly, “foreign accent” was found to be a “salient deficiency” of NNESTs. Also, Timmis (2002) investigated 400 participants from 14 different countries on their attitudes towards English pronunciation. However, none of them were positive about English accents of their own countries, while 68% of them had a preference for a native-like pronunciation. Similarly, in Australia, advanced English as a second language (ESL) learners possessed a negative attitude towards their non-native accents (Dalton-Puffer et al., 1997). Under this circumstance, NESTs are naturally preferred rather than NNESTs due to their advantages in pronunciation.

To conclude, in light of some SLA theories (especially the cognitivist approaches) that emphasize the importance of native-like language as being a L2 learner’s goal and native speakers as being the ideal models, together with people’s stress on “accent”, the status of the NS ideology in ELT has been consolidated.

3. INFLUENCES OF THE NS IDEOLOGY ON ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING

This section will shed light on the influences of the NS ideology on English teaching and learning, with a focus on hiring discrimination and the option of ELT methodology.

3.1 Hiring discrimination

For one thing, the NS ideology, this kind of “unprofessional favoritism”, naturally lead to hiring

discrimination (Clark & Paran, 2007; Moussu, 2006). For example, Mawhinney and Xu (1997) investigated the English language proficiency of native and non-native ESL teachers in Canada, and they found that NNESTs were always doubted about their accents, which is the most apparent issue for ESL teacher recruitment. NNESTs stated that they were often prejudiced against in terms of their accents and complexions. In addition, McKay (1995) studied a group of international ESL students’ preference of native and non-native teaching assistants, in which the native ones won due to their pure pronunciations. In many other studies similar to above, NESTs are often considered to be more appropriate and ideal for ELT, owing to their standard pronunciation and accents, such as Canagarajah’s (1999a) and Tang’s (1997) studies. These cases indicate the widespread belief that NESTs are superior to NNESTs with regard to language abilities, in particular accent, has brought about NESTs and NNETs’ inequality in employment.

3.2 The option of ELT methodology

For another, ELT methodology has been affected by the tendency to rest on the NS ideology (McKay, 2003a). According to Phillipson (1992a), if NESTs are considered as better English teachers in comparison with NNESTs, it means that the monolingual approach should be adopted in ELT. The Inner Circle countries tend to provide a teaching model for the countries outside to follow (Tollefson, 1991). As a result, the choice of ELT methodology has something to do with the native speaker model.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which originated from America and is based on the native speak model, is an example. It was proposed by Hymes in the 1970s. Many researchers such as Harmer (2003) argue that CLT should be the dominant teaching approach in ELT. So, it has been widely adopted in Inner Circle countries, and has largely spread to many Outer Circle and Expanding Circle countries around the world, such as China, Korea, Japan, and so on. As a monolingual teaching approach, using the target language for communication purposes is one of its characteristics. However, this teaching method is not totally perfect, and has been found problematic and difficult to implement in many English as a foreign language (EFL) countries by some scholars (e.g. Littlewood, 2007). In other words, it does not suit all teaching contexts. This issue will be further discussed in Section 4.2.

4. IRRATIONAL ASPECTS OF THE NS IDEOLOGY

Essentially, the NS ideology in ELT is inappropriate and not rational. This argument can be substantiated from multiple perspectives.

4.1 English as an International Language (EIL) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) approach

Non-native users of English for international

communication purposes have outnumbered its native speakers (Kachru, 1996). This shift has exerted influences on ELT. Researchers have been studying World Englishes for about five decades. World Englishes or English as an International Language (EIL) have been proposed for a wide range of English users. The EIL approach emphasizes that English is being learnt for international or intercultural communication (Jenkins, 2002), and English learners worldwide need to see English as their own communication languages instead of a foreign language subject to Inner Circle Countries such as Britain or America (McKay, 2002). Similarly, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) approach has also been put forward, according to which, the function of English in international contexts is to serve people with different cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds to communicate, mainly among non-native speakers (Jenkins, 2009). It places emphasis on mutual intelligibility instead of nativeness, and supports local accents of pronunciation which do not affect understanding (Jenkins, 2006). For example, features of connected speech or rhythm are important for native speaker targets. However, seen from EIL/ELF, they are not that important, because they do not influence the expression of meaning.

As a consequence, from the perspective of EIL or ELF, special attention should not be given to native-like accents, as it is not closely linked to communicative competence or the ability to apply language. It is understandable and effective communication that really counts. On this condition, NESTs are not necessarily that useful and essential.

4.2 Context-based teaching approach

As is discussed above, many ELT methodologies such as CLT stem from Inner Circle countries but have been largely accepted and adopted by many Outer Circle and Expanding Circle countries. However, this teaching approach is not necessarily applicable to all the teaching contexts without any problems. Prabhu (1990) argues that the best teaching method in ELT depends on the teaching context. It is necessary for educators to look for a teaching approach that is best correspondent to the local teaching situations.

The context-based teaching approach concentrates on the consideration of the teaching environment, including students' needs, local cultures, testings, teaching materials, and so on (Bax, 2003). Take China as an example. Liu & Gong (October, 2000) probed into CLT in the context of China, and found that this teaching approach could not effectively help Chinese students perform well in the college entrance examination, which is usually grammar/reading/writing-oriented. In addition, some students were skeptical about CLT and did not consider it as formal learning but like playing games, with the influence of the traditional teaching culture, which is usually teacher-explaining and students-listening. Moreover, classroom size was also a problem for CLT in the Chinese context. Under this circumstance, the only use

of CLT is not the best choice for ELT in China. It is better to integrate CLT with other methods such as grammar-translation. But this goal would be difficult to achieve by NESTs, since it is high-demanding in terms of the local language. So, from the perspective of the context-based teaching approach, NESTs are not that advantageous, compared with NNESTs. This point would be further elaborated in the next subsection.

4.3 The advantages of NNESTs

A number of scholars have been challenging the NS ideology during the past decades, including Mahboob (2005), Medgyes (1992), Moussu (2006), Nunan (October/November 1999), Phillipson (1992a), Rampton (1990), and so on. According to Phillipson (1992a), NNESTs have some characteristics that NESTs lack, such as their own experiences of ESL/EFL learning, so that the former can know better about the students' learning features, difficulties or needs.

Medgyes (1992, 2001) also points out that NNESTs possess a list of strengths that NESTs may not have, including a) the imitable models of successful and effective learners, b) the ability to introduce useful learning strategies, c) the ability to supply more information about English, d) the capability to predict learning problems, e) the characteristic of knowing students' needs, f) the sharing of students' first language. Firstly, in terms of language proficiency, NNESTs are more or less more trustworthy for students to imitate, because NESTs are not English "learners" themselves like students. NNESTs' proficiency is native and impossible for ESL/EFL learners to achieve. Secondly, unlike NESTs who have acquired English naturally, NNESTs have experienced the process of learning English themselves, so they are more aware of how to learn it effectively. Thirdly, during NNESTs' own learning process, they have gained knowledge about how English works. So, compared with NESTs, they are better informants. Fourthly, having the similar learning experiences, NNESTs are better at predicting language difficulties and helping students avoid them, and have great empathy with learners and know when and where they need help. Finally, native language is an effective tool in the English teaching classroom, which can be used to explain abstract items and therefore enhance the efficiency. Medgyes' list of NNESTs merits have been further supported by other scholars (e.g. Mahboob, 2004).

4.4 Ideal English teachers are not born but made

From another perspective, some researchers (e.g. Nunan, October/November 1999; Rampton, 1990) assert that it is training and experience that make a good English teacher, and they play a greater role in determining a teacher's successful teaching. That is to say, qualities of English teachers are non-inherited, and good English teachers are not born but made.

Similarly, some educators (e.g. Medgyes, 1992) propose to get rid of the NESTs and NNESTs dichotomy. For example, Medgyes and Arva (2000) embrace a view that the NESTs and NNESTs dichotomy relies on four

hypothesis, including competence in the target language, knowledge of grammar, competence in the local language, and other aspects related to professional behaviour (e.g. teaching methodology), and both NESTs and NNESTs have equal opportunities to be good English teachers if they can fulfill the foregoing four requirements (Chang, 2004).

4.4.1 Competence in the target language

Apparently, NESTs are at an advantage in terms of instructing pronunciation, speaking, conversation or English idioms (Quartly, 2000). Consequently, many NESTs are recruited just based on their language background. Meanwhile, it is undeniable that many NNESTs are lacking in excellent speaking competence, because they were educated on the basis of the grammar-oriented testing system. However, it is a wrong assumption that NESTs, without doubt, know how to teach English simply for being native speakers. In addition, competence of the target language, such as using idioms appropriately and determining whether a language form is exact, can be improved by explicit learning (Phillipson, 1992b). In that case, NNESTs also have opportunities to be ideal English teachers if their English competence is ideal and outstanding enough like NESTs.

4.4.2 Knowledge of grammar

Medgyes and Arva (2002) found out that NESTs are good at conversation or speaking classes, while NNESTs outperform them in teaching grammar. In many ESL/EFL countries such as China, Japan and Korea, grammar is an important section and measurement, occupying a large percentage in a variety of examinations. So, it is highlighted in English teaching and learning. NNESTs used to be English learners themselves and they have first-hand experiences in learning grammar. Furthermore, grammar instruction is emphasized in their pre-service training. In other words, NNESTs have learnt grammar and know how to effectively convey grammar knowledge to students. As for NESTs, they are naturally proficient in the English language, but they are not necessarily very knowledgeable about explaining the use of English grammar (Liu, 2002), due to the fact that they acquired the language in a natural way without explicit learning. That is to say, with respect to teaching grammar, NESTs may feel it challenging. However, the teaching methodology of grammar can also be learnt and mastered by training. In this sense, if NESTs are well trained in grammar teaching like NNESTs, they will be competitive in ELT.

4.4.3 Competence in the local language

As is discussed above, some monolingual teaching approach like CLT has been found impractical and challenging in some EFL contexts. The use of native language is really helpful and efficient sometimes in classroom teaching. Due to the lack of the local language proficiency, NESTs encounter some setbacks in teaching from time to time, since they have problems explaining lessons in ways that are straightforward and easy to understand. As a result, the learners need to guess a lot.

Also, Medgyes and Arva's research on NESTs in Hungary in 2000 reveals that NESTs felt it a handicap not to know the local language, because it is difficult to effectively get across message to students, in particular to low level students, and that they could not fully comprehend students' mistakes. Instead, sharing the same native language, NNESTs have experienced the similar learning process as learners do, and are capable of fully understanding students' mistakes, anticipating their problems, having great empathy and knowing when and where they need assistance. In that case, mastering the local language of learners is of great importance for teachers, and NNESTs have already possessed this advantage. If NESTs try to have knowledge about their learners' first language, it will be beneficial.

4.4.4 Other aspects related to professional behaviours

Other aspects related to professional behaviours, such as teaching methodology, also determine the effect of teaching. The difference between effective and ineffective teachers does not depend on what they are born with, but on teaching methodology (Chang, 2004). It is wrong to assume that excellent English speakers can be taken for granted as competent English teachers without the consideration of the pedagogy aspect. The mastery of appropriate teaching methodologies is a process of training, not a matter of complexions or nationalities. Both NESTs and NNESTs can master the suitable teaching approach applicable to a given context by training and teacher education, regardless of their language background.

5. IMPLICATIONS

The discussion of the NS ideology can provide implications for English teaching and learning. Not only the government but also the schools need to take it seriously and adopt a correct attitude towards this issue, because some scholars hold a viewpoint that the NS ideology of a country is usually dependent on the attitudes of the government and schools (e.g. Chang, 2004). She took Taiwan as an example. In 2003, to improve Taiwanese people's speaking proficiency, the Taiwanese government recruited the first group of 400 foreign teachers to teach English in public primary and secondary schools. In addition to teaching students, they were also assigned to train the local English teachers. One of the requirements for recruitment is to be native speakers from America, Britain, Canada or Australia. Their salary was very decent and reached twice of the average salary of most local English teachers. On this condition, the Taiwanese teachers, students, parents are constantly exposed to the promotion of the NS ideology from the government, and are thus brainwashed gradually. As a consequence, the government should not be one-sided, but should encourage and promote NNESTs in English teaching and learning.

In addition, considering the different characteristics of NESTs and NNESTs, the schools should adopt a

collaborative model of NESTs and NNESTs in order to make use of their particular strengths. Three main key characteristics of this model are: (1) integrative - NESTs and NNESTs; (2) cooperative - mutual sharing; and (3) additive - NESTs' strengths plus NNESTs' strengths. In this sense, English teachers need to cooperate with each other and do team work in order to utilize their strengths and offer assistance to each other.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper is attempted to have a general picture of the NS ideology in ELT. Firstly, it reveals its relevance to some SLA theories (especially the cognitivist approaches) and English learners' persistent pursuit of native-like accents. Secondly, it discusses its effects on English teaching and learning, including employment discrimination and CLT, a monolingual language pedagogy. Thirdly, it questions the NS ideology from multiple aspects, namely, EIL/ELF approach, context-based teaching approach, advantages of NNESTs, and the notion that "ideal English teachers are not born but made", and argues that NESTs and NNESTs both have opportunities to be good English teachers. Finally, it puts forward implications for English teaching and learning for the government and the local schools with reference to the foregoing discussions. It is hoped that with the help of the paper, in-service teachers, learners, or decision-makers can form a general concept of the NS ideology and subsequently get rid of their bias against the role of NNESTs in ELT.

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