

Some remarks on research on non-native teachers of English

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Some years ago, I argued for the strong bond between the idea of English as an International Language / English as a Lingua Franca and non-native (NNS) English language teachers (Llurda 2004). My main point was to claim that NNS teachers need to embrace English as an International Language as a way to gain legitimacy in the profession, and by the same token English as an International Language needs to gain the support of NNS teachers as the first step towards being progressively recognized as a legitimate form of English. However, NNS teachers are far from being unanimously willing to embrace such an idea (Llurda 2009), and in fact, the study of the ideology and attitudes of NNS teachers of English reveals that there are several factors affecting their positions and views. Therefore, I will here refer to some of the findings I've made in previous studies regarding the characteristics of NNS English teachers.

I will particularly refer to a study I conducted a few years ago among Catalan non-native teachers of English (Llurda 2003, 2008). In it, teachers acknowledged their weaknesses in L2 proficiency but did not think that these difficulties affected their teaching. According to them, a NNS teacher does not need to be fully proficient in the language in order to teach it successfully. Most teachers declared they wanted their students to learn *English as an international language*. Paradoxically, respondents rated significantly higher the need for a teacher to know the British culture than to know the Catalan/Spanish culture, that of the EU, or the culture of Commonwealth countries. In other words, Catalan teachers thought that learning English implied learning about the culture of the UK, but not so much learning about the culture of other English-speaking countries, or other countries in the immediate international context, or even their own culture. This finding stands in contradiction to the enthusiastic embrace

of English as an international language, and shows that teachers still have a long way to go in their recognition of the international status of English and its implications.

Two of the results obtained in that study were apparently incompatible: Two thirds of teachers thought that being a NNS gave them a specific pedagogical advantage over NSs in the classroom, but another two thirds would choose a NS teacher for themselves. The remaining one third said they would like a NS teacher who did not know Catalan or Spanish, and only 3% indicated a preference for a NNS teacher. Respondents were not given the option of a Catalan NNS teacher of English, in order to avoid self-identification with that supposed teacher, rather, they were given the options of choosing a NS or a (non-Catalan) NNS, who either knew or did not know the Catalan and Spanish languages. The rationale for this question was that if NNSs were intrinsically better due to their increased awareness, empathy, and knowledge of learning strategies, respondents would prefer a NNS regardless of what their language background was. This did not happen, thus raising the question of whether the arguments used to proclaim the virtues of NNSs are based on the implicit assumption that NNSs speak the same L1 as their students, and the arguments used to show the weaknesses of NSs are based on the implicit assumption that all NSs are monolingual speakers who have no knowledge of the first language of their students. This would certainly be an oversimplification of a much more complex reality.

One important implication that may be derived from the above finding is that, frequently, what are considered distinctive features between NSs and NNSs are nothing but distinctive features between teachers who know the L1 of their students and teachers who don't. If the Catalan teachers in the above mentioned study (Llurda 2003) had to choose a foreign-born teacher, they would choose the native speaker. This may seem rather an obvious response, and the result is relatively irrelevant in the Catalan context, as there are practically no NNSs with different L1 backgrounds, but it becomes important when seen through the light of ESL contexts (*i.e.*, US, Canada, UK) in which increasing numbers of NNSs with different L1s are obtaining TESOL qualifications and finding teaching jobs. Based on the above results, students will definitely prefer a NS to a NNS of a different L1. Thus, NNS teachers in ESL settings have to be aware

of the difficulty of being accepted as suitable teachers by students of different language backgrounds: they will have to assert their credibility as proficient speakers of the language of instruction (Kamhi-Stein, 2000), in spite of the voices stating that they are rightful and legitimate users of English as an International Language (Llurda 2004).

Another quite relevant finding (Llurda 2008) was the fact that teachers who stayed in English-speaking countries for a period of over three months rated their language skills higher than those who did not, and also expressed a higher appreciation for complex training activities (*e.g.*, sharing experiences with colleagues) as opposed to simpler ones (*e.g.*, attending language improvement courses), and showed significantly different attitudes with regard to critical issues in second language teaching, such as the use of the students' L1 in the English classroom, or the realisation that English is a true world language. Contrary to Medgyes' (1994) claim, teachers who had stayed longer in English-speaking countries showed a greater appreciation for NNS teachers than teachers who had not spent a long time abroad. In other words, teachers with longer experience in English-speaking countries appeared to have improved their language skills as well as their self-confidence, which enabled them to be more critical and open to changes in their teaching principles, that is, less dependent on the traditional values giving monolingual NSs the consideration of ideal teachers.

Additionally, the participants in my study (Llurda 2003) gave very little credit to their training years at the university. This result makes it worth pausing to think carefully about the curriculum future teachers have to follow. In contrast to the low appreciation of university courses, teaching practice was regarded as the most influential training experience. Nevertheless, learning to teach solely "by teaching" has a downside, which is the likelihood of their learning "on the spot" and the hunt for quick, ready-made solutions, with few opportunities for contrasting intuitions with theory-based and empirical findings. An expected outcome of this attitude may be a lack of involvement in professional activities, such as attending and presenting papers at conferences, which have been reported as highly recommended for the beneficial effects they have in establishing the professional status of language teachers (Kamhi-Stein, 1999; Hones, 2000; Carrier, 2003). Additionally, as Tsui (2003) shows, experience in

teaching does not always lead to teaching expertise, which renders rather invalid the teachers' claim that they mainly learn through experience with no further element of reflection or critical involvement.

One finding that is worth mentioning here is the lack of input and interaction opportunities experienced by teachers. Given the fundamental role of input and interaction in second language development, the low exposure of Catalan teachers to TV and films in English, combined with the large number of teachers who have very limited written or oral interactions in English outside the class, presents a picture of language development that is far from optimal. The positive effect of long stays in English-speaking countries on language proficiency points to one of the possible solutions to this, namely, an increase in the financial support given by educational authorities to teachers who spend some time abroad to improve their English language skills. An increase in the number and availability of TV shows and films shown exclusively in English would be a slightly more complex, but interesting, option that would probably have beneficial effects for the whole community of English language learners. Also, the adoption of proposals pointing towards the need to incorporate foreign languages into wider areas of everyday school life (Serra and Ramírez, 2001), as well as the growing popularity of Task-Based Language Teaching (Estaire and Zanón, 1994; Ribé and Vidal, 1994; Siguan, 1995), may set the ground for richer interactions inside and outside the classroom.

Finally, as shown in Llurda & Huguet (2003) some effects of *level of teaching* were found on teachers' responses. Thus, the following differences between primary and secondary teachers were observed:

- Language proficiency: Secondary teachers' self-ratings were superior in general proficiency, and three academically-oriented skills, namely grammatical accuracy, knowledge of grammar rules, and reading comprehension.
- Communicative orientation: primary teachers showed a preference for communicative methods, combined with a higher appreciation for the positive effects of attending teaching training sessions.
- Prevalence of monolingual teacher NS conventions: primary teachers appeared more favourable towards accepting NSs as ideal teachers, with some primary teachers expressing their preference for monolingual NSs.

It may be concluded from all the above that well-trained NNS teachers are proficient users of English who, nonetheless, are aware of their language deficits. However, there are some NNS teachers and student teachers who experience language difficulties that may make it difficult for them to perform their teaching tasks in a completely successful manner. The variability in language proficiency among teachers is one of the worst handicaps experienced by NNS teachers, as it makes all of them potentially suspicious of not having reached a sufficient level of proficiency. This can create a lack of appreciation for their capacities, and a corresponding loss of status among colleagues, administrators, and students. Only with hard work and constant commitment to the development of their language skills can NNS teachers eliminate the stigma of being poor speakers of the language.

NNSs appear to prefer NSs as teachers, and to take Britain as the model for culture teaching. Catalan teachers' responses are ambivalent with regard to the need to teach a variety of English that is beyond any particular community of NSs (*e.g.* the British). Becoming aware that NSs are not intrinsically better teachers, and ensuring they are proficient speakers of English as an international language, should contribute to the general acceptance of NNSs as rightful teachers without further questioning of their skills and capacities. That would certainly have a positive effect on their self-confidence.

An important handicap experienced by NNS teachers is lack of self-confidence. Initially, I had not planned to investigate this concept. The literature on NNS teachers had not emphasized it and this did not seem to be a topic of much importance during the initial stages of my research. However, as the study progressed, self-confidence appeared to become an important variable. It seems likely that lack of self-confidence may eventually affect some NNS teachers' performance. A series of interviews with TESOL practicum supervisors confirmed that they considered important to help NNS student teachers increase their level of self-confidence as a key to their professional success in language teaching.

Research on NNS teachers has just started to gain momentum and there is still a long way to go. Much more research is needed. Teachers' opinions have been explored in a variety of studies (Medgyes, 1994; Reves and Medgyes, 1994; Samimy and Brutt-Griffler, 1999; McKay, 2003).

Students' views have also been dealt with (Lasagabaster and Sierra, 2002, 2005; Moussu, 2002; Benke and Medgyes 2005, Pacek 2005). However, there is still a need for classroom observation studies in which the actual performance of NNS teachers in different contexts is reported. Only Árva and Medgyes (2000) and Cots and Diaz (2005) have taken a limited step on this direction. Many more studies are needed in the future. The observation of classes will be the ultimate test for many of the claims that are currently made. In any case, regardless of the methodology, future research should avoid falling in an oversimplification of the issues. As claimed in Moussu and Llurda (2008), one of the points that need to be emphasized is that NNSs do not constitute a homogeneous group, as there are several factors that affect the ultimate teaching capabilities of a given teacher. In my research, six factors appeared as particularly relevant: NNS teachers' L1 background, culture and teaching tradition, language proficiency, training, individual qualities, and past experiences.

These factors combine in a way that ultimately determines the teaching characteristics of an individual. Future research should take these factors into account and contemplate any generalizations regarding NNSs or NSs in the light of these factors.

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ABSTRACT

In the last twenty years, we have seen a great deal of research on English as a Lingua Franca and non-native teachers of English. In this chapter, I intend to provide a global overview of some of the main findings obtained in previous studies, with the goal of centering the attention on those aspects with the highest relevance and emphasizing the connection between non-native teachers and English as a Lingua Franca.

RESUMEN

En los últimos veinte años, hemos visto una abundancia de estudios en el ámbito del inglés como lingua franca y el profesorado no native de inglés. En este capítulo, me propongo ofrecer una visión global de algunos de los aspectos principales obtenidos en estudios previos, con el objetivo de centrar la atención en aquellos aspectos de mayor relevancia y enfatizando la conexión entre el profesorado no nativo y el inglés como lingua franca.

KEYWORDS

Non-native teachers; English as a Lingua Franca; English as an International Language.
