

DEBATE ON WHETHER TO CREATE A WATESOL NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKING TEACHER (NNEST) CAUCUS

The main concern of two of the respondents, was that the creation of a NNEST Caucus would make NNEST members feel discriminated against, or that it might create the unfortunate impression that NNESTs were inferior:

NO! Let's not start splintering. Mainstreaming and keeping everyone in one group is better for everybody..... special groups, as far as I'm concerned, would feel ostracized and left out. Are they special, handicapped, or just look different???

I think it is a bad idea. It alludes to the fact that they are not able to "make" it in the main stream-- that they cannot function in the main organization.. They could have a totally separate organization but not part of WATESOL. It separates them out as being less-- as inferiors; maybe they know grammar but the accents will always be less perfect than a native speaker. It is a bad idea.

RESPONSE:

(1) An NNEST Caucus (like the NNEST Caucus in TESOL) is not a separate organization, any more than your SIG (Special Interest Group) alienates you from the rest of WATESOL members. To take the example of my SIG, Higher Ed., I don't think any one looks at me as inferior because I belong to the Higher Ed. SIG, and I don't feel like I'm ostracized by oh say, the Elementary Ed people. An NNEST Caucus is something you join because its topics and concerns interest you. Also, let me insist, membership is not limited to NNESTs—in fact I'd guess that around 10% of the TESOL NNEST Caucus are native speakers, and the number of native speakers grows yearly. Moreover, NNESTs would not be required to identify themselves as NNESTs nor join the Caucus if they chose not to.

To continue, let me add that I see the essential point of the NNEST Caucus as to help people see that it is ridiculous to treat NNESTs as "inferiors"--that one of the primary purposes of such organizations would be to better educate people as to:

- how in some ways, many NNESTs can be more effective and empathetic teachers than native English speaking teachers
- how whether one is a native speaker or non-native speaker has little to do with how effective you are as a teacher
- how people (native and non-native speakers alike) can unintentionally, unconsciously treat NNESTs as "inferiors" without realizing that they are doing it. There is well documented prejudice against hiring non-native speakers, because they are not seen by

some employers to be as “good” as native speakers, when in fact there are many ways in which NNESTs are often more effective TESOL instructors than native speakers

My collaborator in this effort, Ximena Suarez adds:

Yes! we can be part of the main organization of English teachers, and we want to be part of the main organization, but we are different. Many of us do “look different” and that is unfortunately enough for us to be treated differently by some people. For example, I have been trying to get a paying ESL position at night since I arrived in this country 6 years ago. None of the Adult Education Programs wanted to give me that opportunity. I have taught ESL for 20 years. I think I know the structure of English well, and of equal importance, I know the typical problems of learning English for Latino speakers. But employers do not consider those strengths in the hiring process. They usually tell me that they need native speaking teachers.

Thus, the argument would be that education efforts might help people know that nonnative speakers can be excellent teachers and may provide benefits to students (e.g., as role models like the students who have succeeded very well in English), and to make people more aware of how they are unconsciously treating people as different (which we want to avoid--here, you and I are in total agreement).

THE GIST OF THE THIRD RESPONDENT’S MESSAGE APPEARS IN ITALICS BELOW:

First of all, for clarification, do you mean individuals who do not have native-like proficiency teaching ESL? Or do you mean, for example, someone who came here from another country as a child and mastered English, yet whose first and home language is not English? Or are you referring to people who are clearly not, by their accents and/or speaking skills, not a native speaker of English?

Your question is a good one. And the issue is highly nuanced. Let me try to lay out the issues inductively--

1. Obviously, proficiency counts, and people who have near-native proficiency (and esp. those who don't have an accent that is often marked as "not native") may encounter fewer problems than someone who is "almost, but not quite to near-native" proficiency (or someone who is entirely proficient and intelligible, but who has an identifiable non-native accent).

2. Contrarily, those who are not very proficient in English should not be hired. This is a case of competence, not prejudice on the part of employers.

Why are foreign language teachers (of French, Spanish, German, etc.) in university and high school situations preferred if they are native speakers of the target language? Why are ESL teachers not required to be models of the language?

In response to your comment, I'm not sure that it is always considered "optimal" that foreign language teachers be native speakers. When I look at my foreign language teaching peers here at American University, I would say that close to half are Americans who are of near-native proficiency in the language they teach. Besides, if we stop and think, we know that most second language research shows that students do not learn the accents of any individual teacher, and in fact, if you look at all the immigrant parents in the U.S. who speak "accented", not-perfectly-proficient English; yet who have children who sound as "American" as their peers whose parents have spent many generations here, I think you may agree, that just having what is perceived as an accent (as long as the person is intelligible), should not be an impediment to being a good teacher.

Why do ESL teachers need to be role models? Non-native speakers could be an integral part of a multicultural school community and provide children with role models. Wouldn't that be enough?

Well, you have a point. But earlier you spoke of teachers being "models of the language," which shows there are different kinds of role models. One role that a NNEST can play (that it is very difficult for a native speaker to play) is that of a successful English learner—one, who through long study and hard work has actually pulled off what the students someday hope to do. As a native speaker myself, I can't do that. I speak excellent English because I was born into it. Maybe, I'm just selling a bill of goods to get paid. Maybe no one can learn to use English successfully without growing up speaking it. I suppose others at school could be models of successful English speakers, but not at the same time that the students are going through the frustration of learning English in class—the NNEST teacher validates the methods and techniques she uses.

Moreover, you have to consider EFL environments, not just K-12 ESOL in the U.S. The majority of English teachers in France are French. In fact, the majority of ESL/EFL/ESOL teachers in the world are non-native speakers (just as the majority of foreign language teachers in U.S. public schools).

In EFL environments, for many reasons, the supremacy of the native English speaker is far less clear, esp. if the native speaker is untrained and inexperienced--yet the most blatant and egregious hiring discrimination is practiced and even advertised (including things like high Western salary levels for much less experienced and educated NESTS, and salaries at a half to a third of that for host-country NNESTs with graduate degrees and long teaching experience).

Furthermore, the world is full of native English speaking teachers who are poor teachers. Happily, in EFL settings, being a native speaker is now less perceived as a "magic bullet" guaranteeing a quick and effective English learning experience than it used to be; however, there are still a lot of native speakers out there teaching English based on the fact they have some B.A. and are native speakers--teachers who probably don't know anything about general language pedagogy, let alone language teaching pedagogy. And if you compare these untrained native speakers to a NNEST with a MA or a PhD. in TESOL or Applied Linguistics with several years of teaching experience, it is hard to see how this kind of native speaker would stack up

favorably.

Perhaps someone without native-like proficiency in the target language could well teach something else. But then again, I hear of all sorts of complaints about teachers with heavy accents teaching math which leaves the students confused.

I think this situation has two possible interpretations. I would need more evidence to decide which is correct:

(1) The teacher's accent is demonstrably deviant from any accepted model and is not comprehensible to the majority of her students or colleagues. That should be addressed. And often it is--the development of pronunciation programs for ITA (International Teaching Assistants) is well documented and the results are often impressive. However, I agree with you fully, someone who is not comprehensible (that is, even when you are listening with full attentiveness, they are difficult to follow), is not a competent teacher.

(2) on the other hand, at times, there is a sad lack of exposure and tolerance on the part of "mainstream" Americans for other accents. Just as we should encourage Americans to learn other languages, it would also be just and wise to help them become more familiar with and tolerant of other accents.

If TESOL and others are framing this issue as a discrimination issue, I believe they are missing the point. Many of my ESL colleagues agree with me, but we know that our thoughts (not our feelings, but our professional ideas), are very much non-PC, unfashionable and we keep them to ourselves. In addition, I have heard hoards of non-ESL teachers, not cultured, great intellectuals, but my colleagues at school, make comments like, "Where do they get these people from?"

A fellow ESL teacher and I have discussed, most theoretically, who would be a better ESL teacher, the school custodian speaking total Ebonics or someone like a certain co-worker. This former colleague, who was an aristocrat from Bolivia, spoke beautiful, poetic Spanish. She was an absolute model for Spanish. She could read the phone book and it would be gorgeous Spanish. But this dear lady, retired because she couldn't pass the Praxis (I or II), was no model for English and was hired as an ESL teacher. I once heard her yell, "Sheeldreen, ju mas to see down." To this day I still try to count and analyze all the errors in that one amazing utterance. Give us the custodian any day of the week. I have heard my colleagues at school, make comments like, "Where do they get these people from?"

You quote one of your colleagues as saying, "Where do they get these people?" "These people?" I respond. Again two interpretations of the situation are possible:

(1) the "people" in question are not sufficiently proficient in English and should not have been hired to teach ESOL

(2) "these" people?" Have you ever heard "us--them" expressed more explicitly? Maybe we need to encourage "those people" who make such remarks to be more accepting of diversity.

Let me acknowledge that (1) above can be a problem. Especially, in K-12 environments, it sometimes seems like a commitment to having bilingual ESOL teachers overrides concerns about competency (which includes issues proficiency and intelligibility in English). I do not approve of this at all. That being said, there are many native English speakers in K-12 (in ESOL and in the other subject areas) who aren't competent either--who have no business teaching--so it could be argued that there is far too much incompetence to go around--even leaving aside issues of language proficiency.

Still, just as African-Americans, Latino-Americans, Asian-Americans and other groups are sometimes discriminated against in this country because of the way they look, there are competent, fluent, non-native speakers who are discriminated against simply because of the color of their skins and the belief (often not verified, just assumed) that they were not born in this country. That shouldn't happen.

Mind you, I believe that qualified, trained non-native individuals should be hired to teach ESL if they successfully pass teacher competency exams that include an oral English component.

Okay, but I believe that there is a still need for advocacy in some cases where language proficiency and comprehensibility are NOT issues. Unfortunately, there are many people who consciously or unconsciously devalue someone as an English teacher because oh.... (a) they don't look like "us", or (b) they have an accent (even through they might be perfectly intelligible). I find examples all the time. My wife is Korean, her B.A. was in English, we have been married for 11 years, she speaks only English 95% of her days, she has only spoken to our daughter in English (or French--never Korean), she has an MAT in Elementary Ed from American University, she has a total of 13 years experience teaching elementary school children--clearly she is fluent and proficient in English, but the hiring process for her at MCPS has been long--this past semester she has substitute-taught and on occasions was dismissed or suspected by regular teachers at the school, because she has something of an accent, because she is small and looks Asian--in fact HR people send her to Korean principals to see about jobs!

However, this potentially subjective source of evidence is not my only one. I have been collecting data over the years showing how in TESOL conferences for example, audience have different standards--different expectations for NNEST presenters than NEST presenters. In fact I have a video of one of our MA in TESOL students who is Japanese (and entirely intelligible), who actually had her presentation hijacked for a time by native speakers in her audience (e.g., one native speaker paraphrased what my student had just said, couched it in a question, and as my student began to respond, another native speaker in the audience started waving her hand and shouting, "I know, I know...let me answer that...." and then preceded to take the floor). This got so bad at one point that the native speakers in the audience were having a dialogue between themselves, oblivious to the presenter until my student finally had to say, "Okay, thank you.....those are good points, but let me present the results of my research."

Still, even with the reality of such unconscious discrimination, I will be honest and admit that making the "strong" case for NNESTs often involves assuming comparison to a monolingual native-speaking English teacher--one who does not have a wealth of cross-cultural experience

(obviously if you are a bi- or multi-lingual; if you've done business in other languages and other cultures, the differences between you and an NNEST counterpart becomes less apparent (e.g., in terms of issues like knowledge of English grammar, being empathetic to the difficulty of learning another language, serving as a model of someone who has successfully learned another language).

It might surprise you to know that most members of the TESOL NNEST Caucus would be open to this critique, and I feel that every year, there is much more openness in the Caucus about the fact that (1) proficiency can never be discounted, (2) that intelligibility is very important, and that (3) the number one commitment of any NNEST professional is improving and enhancing his/her production, comprehension, and knowledge the field and language that they teach (as we all should, regardless of our home language).

So let me sum up. Forming a NNEST Caucus is less about hiring discrimination, than it is about:

(a) accepting, acknowledging and honoring our NNEST counterparts as full-fledged peers and colleagues (and depending on their academic backgrounds, frequently our superiors), not as members of a deficient sub-group

(b) examining all these issues publicly, and supporting NNESTs' commitments to improve proficiency, intelligibility, and (in some cases) literacy in NNESTs; while at the same time educating others to the strengths NNESTs often bring to language teaching

(c) encouraging NESTs to do some of those things we NESTs are stereotypically weak in (and stereotypes often carry a kernel of truth): linguistic (esp. grammatical) knowledge, having communicative competency in other languages, and honing our teaching skills (teaching is hard--I'm never perfect, no matter how much time I invest in my classes)

(d) collaborating to share our skills and knowledge, to be models of different roles, and to accept one another as a prelude to being more accepting of others outside our profession (esp. our students).

(e) if these issues evoke such passion in us, there should be a forum for airing these issues--so that in true Socratic fashion, we can stumble towards understanding--an understanding I would argue, which helps us comprehend and validate ourselves as individuals and teachers.

If I were to put the NNEST advocacy stance into a nutshell it would be, "Yes, proficiency is very, very important. However having native English proficiency is no guarantee whatsoever as to one's effectiveness as a teacher, and conversely, one might be a superb teacher and not quite have native speaker proficiency."

Thanks for listening,

Brock Brady and Ximena Suarez
Co-Chair of the Committee for an WATESOL NNEST Caucus