

MAKING THE TRANSITION FROM NON-NATIVE SPEAKER TO NEAR-NATIVE SPEAKER TEACHERS OF ENGLISH: FACING GLOBALIZATION CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ENGLISH

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Abstract

Many job advertisements seeking teachers of English to work in Japan, China, Korea and Thailand, for instance, specify that they are looking for native speaking teachers from USA, UK, Australia and New Zealand. They do not seem to be interested even in trained non-native speaking teachers from their own countries. This situation also exists in many other countries where there is a clear preference for native speaking teachers. This paper will discuss the characteristics, according to scholars in language acquisition, that a native speaker possesses and how non-native speaker teachers who vastly outnumber the native speaker teachers can aspire to approximate to the notion of nativeness in language output. Even though the concept of a native speaker, that of English has become somewhat subjective due to its globalized role, there are some basics that define a native speaker. A non-native speaker is generally one who does not speak a particular language as his/her first language.

Since there is a marked preference for native speaker teachers of English for teaching positions overseas, and since a native speaker is presumed to have superior communicative competence, it would be professionally advantageous for non-native speaker teachers in their countries to aim for near-native speaker competence. This is both an achievable and a realistic goal. The challenges of globalization necessitate that teachers of English, including Muslim, move in that direction for global reach.

Let us try to be clear about the key terms in this paper: *native speaker*, *near-native speaker* and *non-native speaker*. The description which follows may not be definitive

due to overlapping factors, bilingual first language acquisition (FLA) bicultural parental upbringing, residence in a particular country, etc.

According to Bloomfield (1933), a native speaker is one who uses a language from birth, habitually. An individual today may claim to be a native speaker of not just one language, but even two due to a child acquiring two languages simultaneously from birth. De Houwer (2009) cites the example of Carlo whose father was American, while his mother was Italian, but resided in Scotland. He grew up speaking both English and Italian from infancy due to his early bilingual experience and exposure from his parents, siblings, day-care centers and care providers. Carlo's language background is not uncommon these days in many countries due to an increasingly multicultural environment.

The traditional view of a native speaker of English is one who is white, comes from countries such as the USA, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. But this view may be challenged. There is now an increasing number of people who are not white and live and work in these countries and who may qualify to be regarded as native speakers of English due to their flawless and natural use of English, for example, Fareed Zakaria, who writes regularly for *Newsweek*. He has his own talk show- GPS- on CNN. His guests include influential American personalities. Another example is that of Dr. Sanjay Gupta, who currently is the Chief Medical Correspondent on CNN. Both are from the Indian Subcontinent background, but use English effortlessly on par with those who are considered native speakers in the traditional sense.

The majority of people speak English as their native or first language in the inner circle countries, for example, the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. There are many people in the outer circle countries, such as those in South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Caribbean and many countries in Africa (Kachru 1985). English has a prestigious second language status in the latter. It is also the dominant language of many on account of their occupation, social background and exposure to English in various ways. The native language they grew up with has been gradually replaced by local varieties of English (Holmes 2008). Most of these varieties are informal ones, for instance, Manglish in Malaysia and Singlish in Singapore. Varieties of Indian English with local color are well established in India. Thirumalai (2002) states that English is a dominant language of communication among the educated classes in the Indian subcontinent. We can consider speakers who use these local varieties as their first language or main language as native speakers of these varieties. But for teaching purposes and international contacts, these varieties are least desirable. There are however educated users in these countries who are able to speak and write impeccable English., due in part to their early learning and use of the language, coupled with experience in, exposure and attitude towards the language. They feel at home in English, it is not considered an alien language, but rather a home language, and one of the country's languages.

It has to be acknowledged however that not all native speakers share the same degree of linguistic competence. There is variation among the users. There are individual differences with regard to one's command of and ability in the target language.

The consensus of many linguists as to who may qualify as a native speaker (as cited in Lee, J.J 2005) is as follows:

1. An individual acquires the language in one's infancy and continues to maintain using the language (Davies 1991; Phillipson 1992),
2. the individual's knowledge of his/her native language is intuitive (Davies 1991; Phillipson 1992),
3. the person has the ability to produce spontaneous and fluent discourse (Medgyes 1992),
4. the person possesses communicative competence, he or she has the knowledge and the ability to use language within various social contexts (Medgyes 1992; Stern 1983),
5. the speaker identifies himself/herself with a particular language community, or is identified by that community as one of their own (Johnson & Johnson 1998), and
6. the speaker is free from a foreign accent (Scovel 1988).

Native speakers are believed to have an internalized or native knowledge of the following (as cited in Lee, J.J 2005):

1. The proper use of idiomatic usage (Medgyes 1992; Phillipson 1996), for example, a native speaker of English will immediately know what 'pulling someone's leg' would mean, or what is being referred to as a 'white elephant',
2. knowledge of the correct language forms (Davies 1991), for example, the simple past tense form of 'learn' can be 'learned' or 'learnt'. The word 'holiday' can be used both as a noun or holiday depending on the context,

3. having a natural pronunciation (Medgyes 1994), not fake,
4. possession of a fairly large vocabulary, together with the ability to use collocational expressions and phrases (Medgyes 1994), for example, with which expressions does 'breathtaking' collocate,
5. metaphorical usage (Coulmas 1981), for example, we can say 'Salahudeen was a lion in the battlefield'. A native speaker knows when to use 'concrete jungle', and
6. understanding of cultural contexts (Phillipson 1996): in terms of local norms, religious celebrations and way of life, for instance.

Non- native speakers of a language, naturally, do not share much of what the native speakers are naturally capable of doing. They do not use the language habitually as native speakers of a language do. Everybody may be categorized into native and non-native speakers of a language. A non- native speaker of the target language acquires it later after his/her native language. He/She does not use the target language as the main language, nor does the individual use it with much proficiency, for the simple reason that it may be the person's second or third language. Non- native speakers may not be emotionally attached to the target language. Sometimes they are even antagonistic towards it, they may see it as a threat to their own native language and identity.

For non-native speaker teachers of English, the language is their second or third language. Their first language is their native language which they have naturally acquired from birth. Such teachers, may have acquired English later in childhood, adolescence, or even adulthood. Therefore the teacher's communicative competence

is realistically not comparable to that of a native speaker. From being labeled as non-native speaker teacher of English, these teachers should aspire to elevate their status to that of near-native speaker teachers of English whose competence is nearly similar to that of a native speaker's.

Near-native speakers, therefore, are those whose competence is not exactly the same as that of a native speaker's, but have reached a level of language competence which would enable them to interact with native speakers with confidence. The gap between the two is not vastly different. They can go back and forth between their native and target language with ease. They can talk about their culture, religion and local issues in the target language competently. They can produce educational materials which serve the needs of their students.

So, how may near-native speaker competence be developed? It can be done if they strive to attain the following, among others, in the target language:

1. Seek conversations with native speakers of the language in social and professional contexts.
2. Work towards achieving all the components of communicative competence.
3. Try to develop a near-native accent by listening to very good models of the language on the mass media (a near-native accent will not erode the national or ethnic identity of foreign language or non-native speaker teachers).
4. Watch programs in the target language without relying heavily on the sub-titles.

International news broadcasts in English use a global variety of English which is characterized by greater intelligibility. The sit-coms and talk shows do help immensely to achieve the proficiency of near-native speakers.

5. Become aware of current collocational forms.
6. Read newspapers, magazines, books and online materials in the target language.
7. Participate in newspaper columns and opinion sections online.

The above activities incorporate all the macroskills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The active involvement of the above would give the non-native speaker teachers of English a valuable professional identity leading to increased acceptance in a globalized world. It is important for such teachers to immerse themselves in the target language. By doing so, it becomes easier for them to achieve the level of near-native speakers of the language. It will enable them to cross borders and teach the language in a highly linguistically competent manner similar to the native speaker teacher's. It must be emphasized that the non-native speakers do not have to fear losing their cultural or regional identity.

Non-native speaker ought to have the native speakers as their bench mark. They should put in much effort to approximate to the native speakers' competence in all possible ways: linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence. Through constant exposure, practice and experience, it is not impossible for many non-native speaker teachers to acquire very satisfactorily many aspects that define a native speaker. It is very difficult, no doubt, but it is achievable. It is not impossible for those who are determined to make the transition from non-native to near-native speaker teachers.

Conclusion

A vast majority of us who teach English in countries where it is not used by the majority population as their first, are non-native speaker teachers of the language. We do not possess many of the language attributes and intuition that native speakers

naturally have about their first language. It may, primarily be for this reason that some countries, including Asian countries, seem to have a strong preference for native speaking teachers from specific countries where there are large English-speaking communities who speak the language from birth. A valid reason for preferring native speakers over non-native speakers, obviously is because of the more extensive experience the former have as the target language users (Widdowson 1992). Although native speakers may be regarded as language models by virtue of their language being their first language, government policies, administrative matters, cultural influences, local conditions, etc. the ideal target language teacher in many English as a second or foreign language countries (cited in Soriano 2004), is one who has “near-native speaker proficiency in the [target] language, and comes from the same linguistic and cultural background of the learners” (Phillipson 1992:15). So, a realistic target for those non-native speakers involved in English language teaching is to attain the goal of near-native speaker teachers of the language. The right characteristics which have been identified earlier would enable them to work alongside native speaker teachers in a professionally harmonious environment. This near-native speaker competence can be extended to broadcasting, international relations, trade, etc in global contexts.

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