

Chapter 2

A HISTORY OF RESEARCH ON NON-NATIVE SPEAKER ENGLISH TEACHERS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Research on the self-perceptions of non-native speaker (NNS) English teachers, or the way they are perceived by their students is a fairly recent phenomenon. This may be due to the sensitive nature of these issues because NNS teachers were generally regarded as unequal in knowledge and performance to NS teachers of English, and issues relating to NNS teachers may have also been politically incorrect to be studied and discussed openly.

Despite the pioneering work of Medgyes (1992, 1994), it took nearly a decade for more research to emerge on the issues relating to NNS English teachers. In fact, there has been a surge of such studies recently, partly as a result of the establishment of the Non-native English Speakers' Caucus in the TESOL organization in 1999 (see Braine, 1999, or go to <http://nnest.moussu.net/> for more information on the Caucus). At the recently concluded TESOL 2003 conference in Baltimore, USA, more than 20 presentations included the acronym NNS in their titles, and most of these presentations were made by NNS English teachers themselves. This not only indicates that NNS English teachers appear to have a powerful new voice through the Caucus, but also that they are no longer reluctant to openly acknowledge themselves as NNS speakers.

A movement in an educational context could be relevant and popular, but it cannot grow without the backing of sound research and pedagogy. The purpose of this opening chapter is to critically examine the recent studies on

NNS English teachers. One characteristic of these studies is that they have been conducted mainly by NNS researchers. Another is that only a few have covered students' attitudes and preferences—probably the most crucial factor in the study of NNS teachers. A third characteristic is that these studies have been conducted in both ESL and EFL contexts. Because most of these studies were conducted for the purpose of Masters' theses or doctoral dissertations, most are yet to be published.

This chapter will describe the objectives, methodologies, and findings of the following studies: Reves & Medgyes (1994), Samimy & Brutt-Griffler (1999), Inbar-Lourie (2001), Llurda & Huguet (2003), Moussou (2002), Liang (2002), Cheung (2002), and Mahboob (2003). Based on their objectives, the studies have been classified into two categories: self-perceptions of NNS teachers and students' perceptions of NNS teachers. Although every effort has been made to examine all recent studies on NNS English teachers, some may have not been included for the obvious reason that many theses and dissertations are difficult to access because they remain unpublished.

2. SELF-PERCEPTIONS OF NNS ENGLISH TEACHERS

No review of research into NNS English teachers could begin without reference to Péter Medgyes, himself a non-native speaker, who appears to be the first to have brought the issues concerning NNS English teachers to the open. His two articles in the *ELT Journal* titled 'The schizophrenic teacher' (1983) and 'Native or non-native: who's worth more?' (1992), were also the forerunners of his groundbreaking book *The Non-native Teacher* (first published by Macmillan in 1994 and reissued by Hueber in 1999), in which Medgyes mixed research with his own experience as a NNS English teacher and first-hand observations of other NNS teachers, and boldly discussed previously untouched topics that would be considered controversial even today: 'natives and non-natives in opposite trenches,' 'the dark side of being a non-native', 'and who's worth more: the native or the non-native'. Medgyes also advanced four hypotheses based on his assumption that NS and NNS English teachers are 'two different species' (p. 25). The hypotheses were that the NS and NNS teachers differ in terms of (1) language proficiency, and (2) teaching practice (behavior), that (3) most of the differences in teaching practice can be attributed to the discrepancy in language proficiency, and that (4) both types of teachers can be equally good teachers on their own terms.

Reves & Medgyes (1994) was the result of an international survey of 216 NS and NNS English teachers from 10 countries (Brazil, former Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Israel, Mexico, Nigeria, Russia, Sweden, Yugoslavia, and Zimbabwe). The objective was to examine the following hypothesis: NS and NNS English teachers differ in terms of their teaching practice (behaviors); these differences in teaching practice are mainly due to their differing levels of language proficiency, and their knowledge of these differences affects the NNS teachers' 'self-perception and teaching attitudes' (p. 354). The questionnaire consisted of 23 items of which 18 were addressed to both NSs and NNSs and five to NNSs only. Most of the questions were closed-ended and meant to elicit personal information of the subjects and their teaching contexts. The open-ended questions were meant to elicit the subjects' self-perceptions and their opinions relating to the three hypotheses. The overwhelming majority of the subjects, by their own admission, were NNSs of English. In their responses, 68% of the subjects perceived differences in the teaching practices of NS and NNS teachers. Eighty-four percent of the NNS subjects admitted to having various language difficulties, vocabulary and fluency being the most common areas followed by speaking, pronunciation, and listening comprehension. Only 25% of the subjects stated that their language difficulties had no adverse effect on their teaching. In view of these findings, Reves & Medgyes (1994) suggest that 'frequent exposure to authentic native language environments and proficiency-oriented in-service training activities' (p. 364) might improve the language difficulties of NNS teachers. Further, in order to enhance the self-perception of these teachers, they should be made aware of their advantageous condition as language teachers.

In their research, Samimy & Brutt-Griffler (1999) applied the Reves & Medgyes (1994) approach to survey and interview 17 NNS graduate students who were either pursuing a MA or Ph.D. in TESOL at a university in the United States. Their students, referred to as 'rather sophisticated group of non-native speakers of English' (p. 134) by the researchers, were from Korea, Japan, Turkey, Surinam, China, Togo, Burkina Faso, and Russia. In addition to using a questionnaire to collect quantitative data, Samimy & Brutt-Griffler also gathered qualitative data through classroom discussions, in-depth interviews, and analysis of autobiographical writings of the subjects. The aims of the study were to determine how these graduate students perceived themselves as professionals in the field of English language teaching, if they thought there were differences in the teaching behaviors of NSs and NNSs, what these differences were, and if they felt handicapped as NNS English teachers. Responding to the questionnaire, more than two thirds of the subjects admitted that their difficulties with the

language affected their teaching from 'a little' to 'very much'. Nearly 90% of the subjects perceived a difference between NS and NNS teachers of English. They identified the former group as being informal, fluent, accurate, using different techniques, methods, and approaches, being flexible, using conversational English, knowing subtleties of the language, using authentic English, providing positive feedback to students, and having communication (not exam preparation) as the goals of their teaching. NNS English teachers were perceived as relying on textbooks, applying differences between the first and second languages, using the first language as a medium of instruction, being aware of negative transfer and psychological aspects of learning, being sensitive to the needs of students, being more efficient, knowing the students' background, and having exam preparation as the goal of their teaching. However, they did not consider the NS teachers superior to their NNS counterparts. The differences in the teaching practices of NS and NNS teachers, as stated by the subjects of this study, could be attributed to contrasting sociocultural factors embedded in Western and Asian societies. Whereas Reves & Medgyes (1994) focus on the differing levels of language proficiency and their effects on teaching practices, the differing teaching practices identified by Samimy & Brutt-Griffler (1999) may be attributed to cross-cultural differences.

The third study of the self-perceptions of NNS English teachers was conducted by Ofra Inbar-Lourie at Tel Aviv University in Israel, in one of the first studies at doctoral-level on NNSs' issues. Titled 'Native and non-native English teachers: investigation of the construct and perceptions', Inbar-Lourie's (2001) study, conducted in two phases, set out to investigate why some teachers in Israel perceived themselves as NS of English, and the effects of the native versus non-native distinction on the pedagogical perceptions of the teachers. In the second phase of the study, which is more relevant to the topic of this chapter, Inbar-Lourie specifically sought to discover if there were differences in perceptions between teachers who claim to be NS of English and those who do not, with regard to the following factors: differences between NS and NNS English teachers; the teaching and status of the English language; English teaching in Israel; and English teaching and assessment methods. Further, Inbar-Lourie also sought to determine the effect of personal and professional background variables on the pedagogical perceptions of the teachers regarding the above issues.

In the first phase, data was gathered through a self-report questionnaire distributed to 102 English teachers in Israel. In the second phase, self-report questionnaires were distributed to 264 English teachers (93 NSs and 171 NNSs) followed by semi-structured interviews with nine teachers. Results from the first phase indicated that the teachers' native speaker identity could be explained by nine variables, two of which could best predict this identity:

having spoken English from the age of 0 to 6, and others' perception of them as native speakers of English. Results from the second phase of the study indicated that differences between NS and NNS teachers could be detected only in some categories, mainly the superiority of the NS teachers (as espoused by the NS teachers themselves), the degree of confidence in teaching specific language areas, and in student-teacher relations. No differences were found in perception categories relating to teaching and assessment practices, defining students' knowledge of English, the status of the English language, and goals of teaching English. In fact, perception differences in these areas arose not from the teachers' status as NS or NNS but from personal and professional variables such as country of birth, length of residence in the country, school level, and perceived type of school. NNS teachers reported having better relations with students and feeling more confident in using the L1 to facilitate teaching. Interviews with nine teachers confirmed the results from the self-reports.

In a more recent study, Llurda & Huguet (2003) investigated the self-awareness of 101 non-native English teachers in primary and secondary schools in a Spanish city. Through a set questionnaire (partially inspired by Medgyes, 1994) administered orally in one-on-one interviews with the subjects, the researchers aimed to determine how the subjects perceived their own language skills, how these skills affected their teaching, and how the skills had evolved over time; the subjects' teaching ideology as expressed through their preferences for designing a language course and their goals as language teachers; and the subjects' position in the NS-NNS debate, specifically with regard to the preference for NSs or NNSs as language teachers, and the need for cultural knowledge on the part of English teachers.

Although the research approach was qualitative, Llurda & Huguet relied heavily on statistics in the analysis of their data. In the case of language skills, they found that the secondary teachers showed more confidence in their skills than primary teachers, especially in general proficiency, grammar, knowledge of grammatical rules, and reading comprehension. Although primary teachers admitted that they did experience certain difficulties in teaching English, they did not attribute these difficulties to their proficiency in English. As for language improvement over time, the primary teachers displayed a greater awareness of their language improvement and believed that this improvement came through conscious study of the language.

In terms of language courses and language teaching goals, the majority of primary teachers (81.6%) chose communicative functions and topics as the foundations for language courses. Only half the secondary teachers did so, although more of them (38.1%) opted for language structures and habit

creation than their primary counterparts. In the case of teaching goals, almost all the primary teachers (97.2%) preferred communicative strategies, while only two-thirds of the secondary teachers did so.

In the NS or NNS debate, the primary teachers appeared to be more influenced by the native speaker fallacy, half of them stating that they would hire more NSs than NNSs for a language school, although the other primary teachers did state that they would hire equal numbers of NS and NNS teachers. As for secondary teachers, nearly two thirds chose the balanced option of hiring teachers from both groups. In fact, most of the secondary teachers (65.6%) believed that being a NNS was an advantage. As for the need for cultural knowledge, the teachers clearly preferred British culture, with situations involving the English language being closely associated with British NS.

3. STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF NNS ENGLISH TEACHERS

The research described so far has focused on the self-perceptions of NNS English teachers. Research on students' perceptions of these teachers, as crucial as the self-perceptions if not greater, has a more recent history. One of the first studies in this area was by Lucie Moussu, whose M.A. thesis at Brigham Young University, USA, was titled 'English as a second language students' reactions to non-native English-speaking teachers' (2002). Moussu's research questions were as follows: (1) What feelings and expectations did the students have at first when taught by NNS English teachers, and why? (2) What other variables (such as gender, age, first language, etc.) influence the students' perceptions of their NNS teachers at the beginning of the semester? (3) How do the variables of time and exposure to NNS teachers influence the students' perceptions of their teachers?

Moussu's subjects were four NNS English teachers from Japan, Argentina, Ecuador, and Switzerland, and 84 ESL students above the age of 17, both males and females, from 21 different countries. All the students were enrolled in an intensive English program attached to a US university. The students responded to two questionnaires, one given the first day of class the second given fourteen weeks later on the last day of class. Over the 14-week semester, three separate sets of interviews were also conducted with six students. Analysis of the data shows that from the beginning of the semester, the students had positive attitudes towards their NNS teachers. For instance, 68% of the students said that they could learn English just as well from a non-native speaker as from a native speaker, and 79% expressed admiration and respect for their non-native speaker teachers, and as many as

84% of the students expected their class with a such a teacher to be a positive experience. The Korean and Chinese students expressed negative feelings toward their NNS teachers more frequently than other students. Time and exposure to the teachers only made their opinions more positive by the end of the semester. For instance, to the question 'Would you encourage a friend to take a class with this non-native English-speaking teacher?' only 56% of the students had answered 'yes' at the beginning of the semester. By the end of the semester, 76% had answered 'yes' to the same question.

Kristy Liang's Master's research (2002) at California State University, Los Angeles, also investigated students' attitudes towards NNS English teachers. Specifically, the study was designed to investigate 20 ESL students' attitudes towards six ESL teachers' accents and the features of these teachers' speech that contribute to the students' preference for teachers. Five of the teachers were NNSs from different language backgrounds and the other was a NS.

The students listened to brief audio recordings delivered by the six NNS English teachers and rated and ranked the teachers' accents according to a scale of preference. Data was collected through questionnaires which included information on the students' background, their beliefs about teaching, and their ranking and preferences. The results showed that, although the students rated pronunciation/accent in the ESL teachers' speech as very important, pronunciation/accent did not affect the students' attitudes towards their previous NNS English teachers in their home countries. In fact, the students held generally positive attitudes toward the teachers in their home countries, and believed that pronunciation/accent was not as relevant as it appeared in the first place. Further, personal and professional features as derived from the teachers' speech, such as 'being interesting', 'being prepared', 'being qualified', and 'being professional', played a role in the students' preference for teachers. In conclusion, Liang (2002) suggests that, instead of focusing on ESL teachers' ethnic and language background, the discussion on NNS English teachers should focus on their level of professionalism.

So far, what has been missing is an investigation of both teachers and students in a single study, and Cheung (2002) filled this need with her Masters' research conducted at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Cheung's objectives were to determine the attitudes of the university students in Hong Kong towards NS and NNS teachers of English, the strengths and weaknesses of these teachers from the perspective of students, and their capability of motivating the students to learn English. She also attempted to determine if there was any discrimination against NNS English teachers in Hong Kong.

Cheung triangulated her data collection with the use of questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, and post-classroom interviews. The questionnaire was distributed to 420 randomly selected undergraduates from a variety of majors at seven universities in Hong Kong. Most of the students (98%) were Cantonese or Putonghua speakers, and 99% of them had learned English either in Hong Kong or China. Ten students from three universities, were also interviewed. In an unusual approach, Cheung also sought the opinions of twenty-two university English teachers, ranging from head of department to instructor, at six universities. A majority of these teachers were expatriates with about 60% being NS of English. Nearly 90% had been resident in Hong Kong for more than 6 years. The results showed that both students and teachers saw NS and NNS teachers having their respective strengths. A high proficiency in English, ability to use English functionally, and the awareness of the cultures of English speaking countries were the strengths observed in NS teachers. In the case of NNS teachers, the ability to empathize with students as fellow second language learners, a shared cultural background, and the emphasis they placed on grammar were seen as their strengths. As for teacher competency, both students and teachers stated that teachers should be well-informed about the English language, able to make learning relevant and fun, good at motivating students, able to encourage independent learning and thinking, sensitive and responsive to students' needs, and able to respect students as individuals with their own aspirations. Not all students and teachers were of the opinion that there was discrimination against NNS English teachers in Hong Kong.

All the studies of students' perceptions of NNS English teachers described so far have been conducted at the Masters' level. The only doctoral research into this issue was just completed by Ahmar Mahboob (2003) at the Indiana University in Bloomington, USA, under the title 'Status of non-native English teachers as ESL teachers in the USA'. Mahboob's study was conducted in two phases. First, using a questionnaire, he examined the hiring practices of the administrators of 118 college-level adult English language programs, the demographics of the English teachers in these programs, and the demographics of the students enrolled in the programs. Mahboob found that the number of NNS teachers teaching ESL in the United States is low (only 7.9% of the teachers employed at these programs), and that this low figure is disproportionate to the high number of NNS graduate students enrolled in MA TESOL and similar teacher-education programs. Mahboob attributes the low figure to the preference given by most (59.8%) program administrators to 'native English speakers' in hiring practices.

The second phase of Mahboob's study is more relevant to this chapter because it examined students' perceptions of NNS teachers. Instead of using

questionnaires to survey the students, Mahboob used the novel and more insightful ‘discourse-analytic’ technique, asking 32 students enrolled in an intensive English program to provide written responses to a cue that solicited their opinions on NS and NNS language teachers. The student essays were coded individually by four readers who in turn classified the students’ comments according to linguistic factors (oral skills, literacy skills, grammar, vocabulary, culture), teaching styles (ability to answer questions, teaching methodology), and personal factors (experience as an ESL learner, hard work, affect). The analysis of these comments showed that both NS and NNS teachers received positive and negative comments. In the case of NS teachers, the majority of positive comments related to oral skills, with vocabulary and culture also being viewed positively. Negative comments on NS teachers related to grammar, experience as an ESL learner, ability to answer questions, and methodology. In the case of NNS teachers, experience as an ESL learner earned the most number of positive comments, followed by grammar, affect, oral skills, methodology, hard work, vocabulary, culture, ability to answer questions, and literacy skills. NNS teachers received negative comments with regard to oral skills and culture.

4. CONCLUSION

The most obvious factor to emerge from the above description of research is that issues relating to NNS English teachers have now become a legitimate area of research. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, despite the pioneering work of Medgyes in the early 1990s, studies on these issues began to be published in the United States only a decade later. The gap may be due to the fact that Medgyes’ research was published in a journal which is not widely read in the US, and that his book *The non-native teacher* was published only in the UK and was difficult to obtain in the US until it was reprinted by another publisher.

Although the influence of Medgyes on issues relating to NNS English teachers is in the area of teachers’ self-perceptions, his research has stood the test of time and will form the benchmark for many more studies to come. More recently, he has also embarked on the study of NNS teachers’ classroom behavior (Árva & Medgyes, 2000 and learners’ observations of the differences in teaching behaviour of NS and NNS teachers (Benke & Medgyes, this volume) that are bound to become models for future research.

As mentioned earlier, the study of NNS English teachers is a global phenomenon. The research itself has been conducted in Asia (Hong Kong and Israel), Europe (Hungary and Spain), and North America (USA). The

English teachers who have been the subjects of the research have come from no less than 20 countries worldwide, including Africa and South America. In the future, researchers from more countries will be drawn to such studies, and English teachers from more countries will become research subjects. It will be a healthy trend.

An unmistakable characteristic of the studies described in this chapter is that they have all been conducted by NNSs. This, no doubt, is an indication of the empowerment of these researchers, who are no longer hesitant to acknowledge themselves as NNSs and venture into previously uncharted territory. On the other hand, research by NNSs on issues that are critical to themselves may cast a shadow of doubt on the validity and reliability of the data. It must be pointed out that most of these researchers had not removed themselves, as they should have, from the data gathering process. Instead, some had designed and distributed the questionnaires, conducted interviews, and analyzed the data by themselves. When a NNS teacher questions NNS students on preferences for teachers, the responses are likely to be favorable to NNSs. Likewise, when a NNS asks a NS sensitive questions regarding NNS issues, the responses could be more politically correct than accurate.

So, what does the research reveal? The research on self-perceptions, spanning over a decade, indicates that NNS English teachers from more than 20 nationalities and even more L1 backgrounds acknowledge that they are NNSs of English, and that differences exist between themselves and NS teachers in terms of language proficiency and teaching behavior. Many of these NNS teachers also affirm that this (lower) proficiency in English exerts an adverse effect on their teaching. As far as students are concerned, they appear to be largely tolerant of the differences between their NS and NNS teachers, including accent. In fact, evidence suggests that students become more tolerant and supportive of NNS teachers the longer they are taught by these teachers.

In the case of students' perceptions, one factor deserves careful attention in future research. That is, how do students define NS and NNS? Anecdotal evidence suggests that, from some students' viewpoint, all Caucasians (including Finns, Germans, Russians, and Swedes, for instance) are NS of English. Other students, especially Asian-Americans, may not consider American-born Asians to be native speakers of English simply because they are not Caucasian. Hence, when pilot testing questionnaires for use in survey research, or when planning interviews, researchers should ensure that their student informants have a reasonable understanding of the terms NS and NNS.

The relative merits of NS and NNS English teachers have been extensively discussed by, among others, Davies (1991), Widdowson (1994), Boyle (1997), Cook (1999). As the power of the English language spreads,

more and more English teachers will be needed. They will continue to outnumber their NS counterparts simply because the vast majority of English users are NNSs. The supply of NS English teachers, especially those willing to teach under difficult conditions for a meager salary, is limited. Especially in foreign language contexts, the teaching of English may become the exclusive domain of NNSs in time to come.

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