

STRENGTHS AND DIFFICULTIES OF NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE SPEAKING ENGLISH TEACHERS: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM IN ISRAEL

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ABSTRACT. Native English speakers are often assumed to be the most desirable English teachers, due to their fluency and superior knowledge of the language. However, recent research has shown that this is not necessarily the case, especially regarding novice teachers in their first year of teaching. This research recorded and analyzed the experiences of thirty novice teachers, teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). All teachers were graduates of the same training program, yet when asked to rate how they coped during their first year in the classroom in various spheres such as planning, assessment or classroom management, the native English speaking teachers showed that they coped less well than their non-native speaking peers in all spheres. This article discusses the topic from various angles and identifies fundamental reasons why the native speaking English teachers' apparent advantage might also prove to cause specific difficulties.

Keywords: *Teaching English, Native English Teachers, Novice Teachers, Non-native English Teachers*

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG. Englische Muttersprachler sind oft, aufgrund ihrer Geläufigkeit und die herausragenden Kenntnis der Sprache, als die wünschenswerteste Englisch Lehrer angenommen. Allerdings haben die jüngsten Untersuchungen gezeigt, dass dies nicht unbedingt der Fall ist, insbesondere im Hinblick auf Berufseinsteiger in ihrem ersten Jahr der Lehre. Diese Untersuchung erfasst und analysiert die Erfahrungen von dreißig Berufseinsteiger, die English als Fremdsprache unterrichten (EFS). Alle Lehrer waren Absolventen der gleiche Ausbildungsprogramm. Wenn sie verschiedenen Bereichen, wie zum Beispiel die Bewältigung der Planung, Beurteilung oder Klassenraum-Management, während ihres ersten Jahres im Klassenzimmer bewerten mussten, zeigten die

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einheimischen englischsprachigen Lehrern, dass sie weniger gut verkraftet als ihre nicht-muttersprachlichen Kollegen in allen Bereichen sind. Dieser Artikel beschreibt das Thema aus verschiedenen Perspektiven und zeigt die Hauptgründe, warum die muttersprachlichen Englischlehrer' scheinbare Vorteil zu besonderen Schwierigkeiten führen kann.

Schlüsselwörter: *English unterrichten, Englische muttersprachler Lehrer, Berufeinsteiger Lehrer, nicht-muttersprachler Lehrer*

Introduction: The native speaking English teacher – non-native speaking teacher debate

The debate regarding teachers of English as a foreign language (TEFL) who speak the language naturally as their native tongue versus non native speaking teachers is not new, although it has possibly become more topical and complex in recent years, due to the growth of the global village and consequent widespread acceptance of English as an International language.

The differentiation between the two 'types' - native English speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native English speaking teachers (non-NESTs) – was highlighted by the Hungarian TEFL expert and researcher Peter Medgyes towards the end of the 20th century. Medgyes (1992) stated then that the native English speakers' advantage is considered to be *“so substantial that it cannot be outweighed by other factors prevalent in the learning situation”*. He reported on a poll taken amongst English language teaching specialists in London, where two thirds said they would choose to employ native English speaking teachers (NESTs) to non-native speakers (non-NESTs), even if all candidates had similar qualifications. At the same time, a point also raised was that language competence is not the only criteria for teacher success and considered how the disadvantage of non-native speaking teachers can become an advantage, since their pedagogical skills may be more developed.

It should be mentioned that it is becoming harder to differentiate between a NEST and a non-NEST. Whereas twenty years ago native English speaking teachers were an 'attraction' in countries where English is not the native language, as traveling has become easier and societal norms have changed regarding young adults globetrotting independently, there are now considerably more native English speakers traveling and teaching English around the world. Also, as world populations have become less static, there are more local teachers who have spent extended time in English-speaking countries and so have a high level of English language proficiency even if they are not native English speakers per se. As such, the difference between NESTs and non-NESTs has blurred somewhat.

Megyes (2001) analyzed and compared the teaching styles and pedagogical techniques used by NESTs and non-NESTs in the EFL classroom, coming to no clear conclusion regarding the advantage of one over the other. One point that was clear, though, was the disparity between the comprehensive teacher-training received by the non-NESTs compared with the NESTs, many of whom had no training at all or had undergone a minimal preparatory training course in TEFL, lasting a few weeks only. Therefore, although the NESTs had a superior knowledge of the target language, in most cases this was purely intuitive and they had a limited amount of 'content knowledge for teachers'. The phenomenon of teachers who lack even basic training is explained by Arva et al. (1999), who drew attention to the common employment of NESTs for conversation practice only, with the non-NESTs holding real responsibility for the pupils' progress. This might give some legitimacy to the NESTs being employed as teachers despite having less training.

In order to compare the skills and abilities of native and non-native speaking teachers of English in a valid manner, however, it is necessary to ensure that all have undergone a similar or at least adequate training program.

Arva et al. (1999) mention the positive status given to NESTs both due to their colloquial knowledge of the language and awareness that they represent the culture of an English-speaking country. In addition they note that EFL pupils are obliged to use English in lessons given by NESTs, unlike those given by non-NESTs where the pupils' first language (L1) may be used in class to a greater extent. This connects to the accepted feeling that English 'belongs' to the native speaker more than to a person who has learnt the language formally in a classroom setting. In an essay discussing different types of English and who 'owns' the language, Nayar (1994) states: "...correct, good and authentic English language really belongs to the native speakers". Anchimbe (2006) also reiterates the desirability of the native English speaker as an EFL teacher. Given these views, it is not surprising that many NESTs walk into the classroom assuming that they will be experts in teaching. For this reason the research findings presented here are particularly interesting, as they appear to negate commonly accepted assumptions.

Method

The research presented here is part of a comprehensive research project carried out on novice English teachers in Israeli schools in the years 2010 - 2012. All were graduates of the same fast-track academic retraining program for TEFL. The data was collected through ethnographic research methods, within an interpretivist - constructivist paradigm (re: Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006).

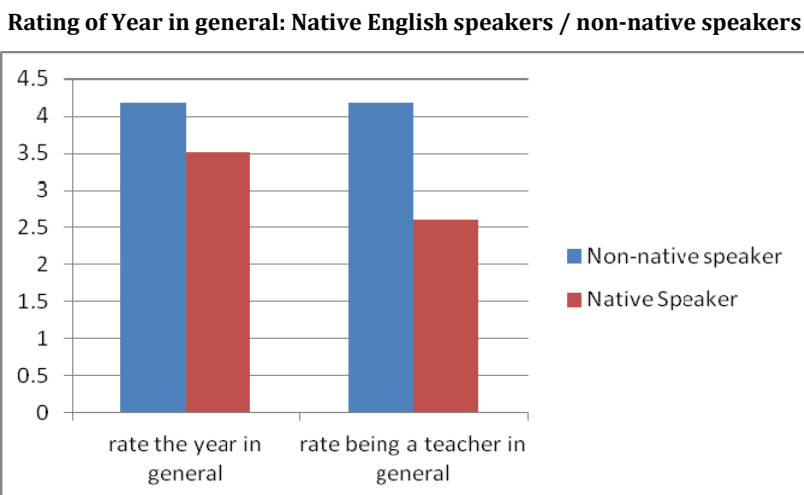
In all, 31 teachers completed questionnaires about their experiences at the end of their first, induction year of teaching (the '*staj*'). Of these, a group of 14 novices were followed closely throughout the year through weekly meetings

led by the researcher. The data regarding their progress, successes and difficulties was collected in a variety of ways to enable potential triangulation of the findings: through systematic observations as recorded in the researcher's journal, through their own diary entries (more than 100 individual entries were used in the research), through informal e-mail correspondence between them and the researcher, through personal, in-depth interviews with ten of the participants and also focused small-group discussions. The interviews were all recorded and relevant excerpts quoted in the research. In addition, questionnaires were given to 40 fresh graduates before beginning their '*staj*' year. This was in order to gauge attitudes and provide the option of comparing these initial, pre-service attitudes with novice teachers' attitudes after a year's experience in the field. The findings were then divided and analyzed according to different variables, one of which was whether the novices were NESTs or Non-NESTs. After this analysis, a second stage of research was carried out focusing on the common initial training program the novices had received prior to beginning to teach.

Findings

In the questionnaires, the novices were asked to rate the first teaching year as it was perceived in general on a scale of 1 – 5, with 1 being the lowest score. Whilst the NESTs rated the year in general (the overall mean average) as 3.52, the non-NESTs gave it a rating of 4.17. On a similar vein, NESTs gave the item 'being a teacher' a rating of 2.6 while non-NESTs rated it 4.17, a far higher score. The results are shown in Fig 1.

Fig. 1: Comparison of Native English Speaking Teachers and Non-Native speakers after their first year of teaching (rated on a 1 - 5 point scale. N=31)

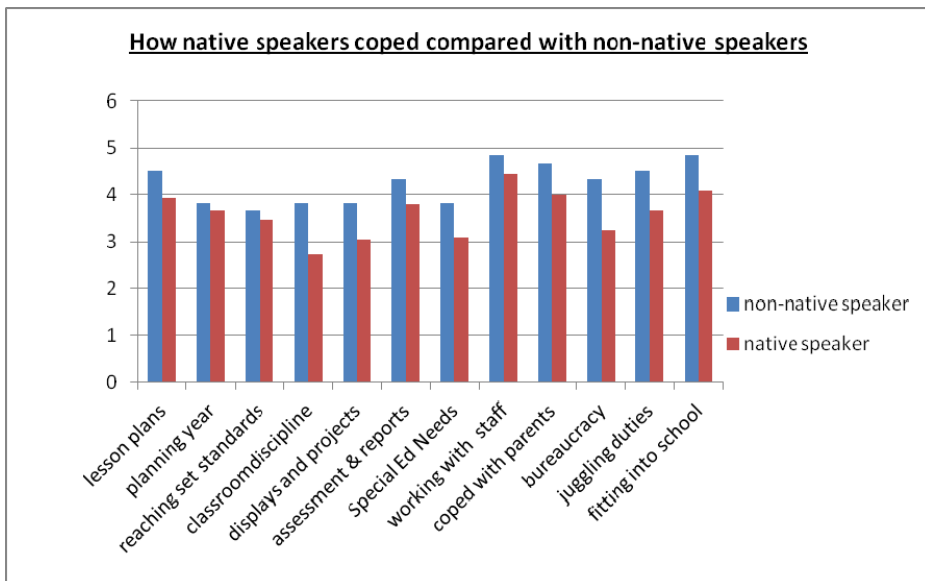


It can be seen from Figure 1 above that in general terms, at the end of their first year of teaching the non-native speakers of English rated the year more highly than the native speakers. The non-NESTS clearly perceived both their experiences working in the school system and the teacher's role within it with more satisfaction than the NESTs' perception of the same. The question that then needed to be asked was whether this reflects on their actual success as teachers or whether the NESTs simply had higher expectations of themselves and their teaching and consequently a higher level of dissatisfaction. Answers were found from analysis of further surveys in the questionnaire and from the qualitative data – interviews and journal entries.

A second survey asked the teachers to gauge how well they felt they had coped in various spheres of teaching, such as planning, assessment, classroom management and so on. They graded themselves on a scale of 1 – 5, where the levels were worded as follows: (1) I didn't do this well at all, (2) I found this difficult, (3) I just about managed, (4) I coped well most of the time, (5) Fine. I succeeded easily.

When the questionnaire answers were divided into NESTs and non-NESTS the results showed that in all spheres the non-NESTS coped better than the NESTs (Fig 2).

Fig 2: How native English speaking teachers (NESTs) coped in different spheres compared to non-native speakers (non-NESTS (1 - 5 point scale))



These statistics were reinforced by comments made in the novices' diaries and in the interviews with them, where it could be seen that the majority of difficulties seemed to be experienced by novices who were native English speakers.

Throughout the year it became apparent that many of the discipline problems especially were caused by either a lack of Hebrew (the pupils' mother tongue) or knowledge of Israeli culture. The fact that native speakers of English have excellent language skills could not compensate for this lack. One novice, Susan, explained the situation thus:

"The hardest thing for me was...I didn't know the school lingo. I didn't know words like "I need to blow my nose". There are so many basic phrases... I just didn't understand what was going on." (Susan, interview excerpt. Minute 2.35).

Since being a native English speaker usually corresponds with being an immigrant to Israel, often there were also difficulties due to a lack of cultural background. This is illustrated well by the following comment:

"For example - what's a 'mechanech'? (home-room teacher). We don't have home-room teachers (in JH schools) in America" (Susan's interview. Minute 6.26).

In addition, the native English speakers seemed to have more difficulty with teaching grammar. The following quote is one of the many examples quoted by the novices on this topic:

"...By the way we were never taught how to teach grammar which is a shame.... Because I'm a native speaker they assumed I knew these things which I don't. I had to teach myself what the heck is present progressive... I had to learn grammar from the internet." (Annie - interview transcript, minute 34).

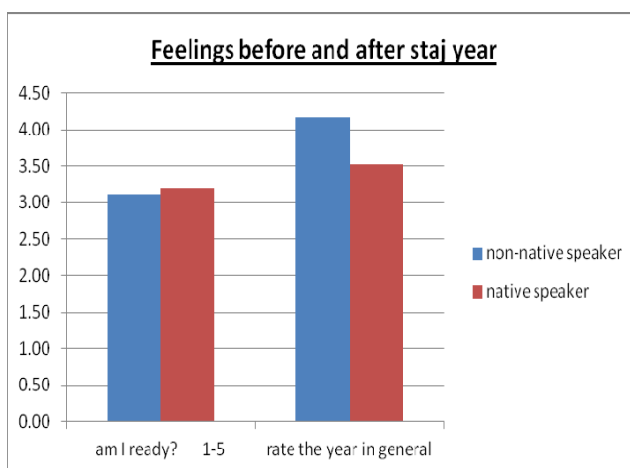
This connects with an entry in the Researcher's journal, which also gives a reason why native-English speakers are less prepared for the field; this time with respect to teaching children on different levels:

*"This isn't really connected to the 'staj' per se, but today a couple of 2nd year students were speaking with me about their experiences during the recent teaching practice week and said something fascinating: **"We have hardly been taught anything about heterogeneous teaching or how to manage classes on different levels. The only two courses which have shown us how to work individually with pupils are the two writing proficiency courses we have done"**. In other words- all the didactics courses that supposedly teach classroom management or dealing with special needs do not actually do so, whereas the courses aimed at teaching content (English proficiency) in fact provide them with good modeling for managing a class on different levels"* (Researcher's journal: 6.4.2011).

To gain a wider understanding of these unexpected findings regarding native speaker teachers, a comparison was then made between the expectations and actual experience of both native and non-native English speakers. The questionnaires

filled in by new graduates before beginning their *staj* year included the question: In general, do you think you are ready to go out and begin your teaching career? The results of this question were compared with novice teachers' rating after their first *staj* year. The results are shown in Fig. 3.

Fig. 3: Feelings before and after *staj* year – native Speakers / Non-native speakers (rated on a 5 point scale)



As can be seen, before the *staj* year, the feelings of readiness were similar, with the native English speakers showing slightly more confidence (3.2 on a 5 point scale compared with 3.1). At the end of the year, the Native English speakers on average rated the year as 3.52, compared with the non-native speakers who clearly felt they succeeded better and gave it a 4.17. In other words, the non-native speakers fared much better than they had anticipated, compared to the native speakers of English.

The comparative success of the non-native speakers of English compared to the native English speakers was an interesting discovery. Reasons for this will be discussed in the next section.

Discussion

According to the findings, the common assumption that native English speakers are 'better' English teachers could be seen to be false – at least during their first year. All data sources – from the novice teachers' answers to the questionnaires to analysis of their personal diaries, the researcher's journal and correspondence throughout the *staj* year – all showed that NS teachers found it

harder in the classroom than their non-native speaker counterparts. When interviewed, they also expressed far more frustration and uncertainty regarding their work, as well as more disillusionment. These difficulties were due to a lack of knowledge of Israeli school and cultural norms, lack of proficiency in Hebrew and also a lack of 'English knowledge for teachers'. There were many examples showing that the NESTs were simply lacking in knowledge of HOW to teach English, a problem that native speakers of a language have, compared to others who have learned the language in a formal classroom setting. Because they have acquired the knowledge intuitively, they do not know how to impart that knowledge to others in a systematic manner.

A recent study by Haim (2010) states that *"Pre-service education programs should be designed in such a way as to help prospective teachers acquire a deep, well-organized knowledge of the various aspects and domains of their subject matter, as well as how this knowledge is incorporated into classroom practice."*

This emphasizes that it is not enough for teachers to know and use the English language well themselves, but they must learn to understand the underlying principles of the language and how to teach it in schools. This is particularly true in Israeli schools, where English is taught in a communicative manner, all aspects of the language combined, without separate conversation classes taught specifically by NESTs. Every teacher has complete responsibility for the pupils' progress in all spheres. NESTs form a large proportion of English teachers in Israel and need the same knowledge base as non-NESTS.

A comprehensive collection of necessary topics and skills that all EFL teachers should have is given in Penny Ur's classic work 'A Course in Language Teaching' (Ur, 1996). These include: (1) The teaching process: how to prepare, present, practice and assess), (2) What needs to be taught: vocabulary, grammar, functional language, (3) Teaching the four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking, (4) Classroom management and lesson planning and (5) Learner differences: age, level and ability.

Since all novice teachers studied in this research had graduated from the same training-program, which officially covered all these topics, the question arises as to how the NESTs could be so ill-equipped with classroom skills and teaching techniques when they had, in fact, received the same training as the non-NESTS.

An answer was found in the continuation of the researcher's journal excerpt from 6.4.2011 quoted previously. To quote:

"If this is the case, then those students who have English as a Native language are at a great disadvantage, since they are exempt from taking these 'proficiency' courses – as their English is already of a high standard. However, this also means they are missing out on apparently successful modeling of what to do when teaching language." (Researcher's journal, 6.4.2011)

To clarify matters further, it should be emphasized that while the non-native speakers had spent years of their childhood sitting in English lessons and therefore experiencing a variety of different teaching methods, the native speakers had experienced none of this. From interviews with college staff in the teacher-training program during the second part of the research it also became apparent that the native speakers were exempt from participating in English proficiency classes in the college. Although often expected to present a paper or report to prove they were on the required level of proficiency in lieu of participating these courses, this was no substitute for taking part in lessons, which not only helped develop English proficiency but also held a 'hidden agenda' of preparing the trainees to teach, modeling different techniques and giving ideas that they could use in their classes afterwards. While the program offered a variety of didactic-based courses such as teaching literature, the heterogeneous classroom or assessing the EFL learner, which were all taken by native and non-native speakers alike, these tended to be taught in a more academic and formal manner than the proficiency courses and gave fewer tools for the classroom. This all led to a situation whereby, while the native speakers undoubtedly had superior English skills themselves, they often lacked the ability to explain and teach the language to others.

It should be remembered that this research studied novice teachers only. The fact that native speakers of English have more difficulties at the beginning of their professional career does not necessarily mean that this will be the case after several years' experience. Although their higher level of English might be overshadowed by lack of techniques and problems of acclimatization at first, it could be that once they have honed their teaching skills more and become familiar with Israeli school norms and culture, they will then be free to utilize their superior English skills and become exceptional teachers. It would be interesting to carry out a further piece of research in a decade or so, to see what actually happens to these teachers.

Whatever happens in the future, though, it is clear that any teacher-training program should ensure that native English speakers receive enough 'English knowledge for teachers' to give them sufficient tools and skills to know what to do in the classroom.

Conclusion

This research examined the experiences of novice English teachers in Israel. It showed that native English speaking teachers found it harder to cope in the classroom than their non-native speaking peers. Despite all being graduates of the same college training program, it became apparent that the native speakers had received less real preparation, for while fluent in the language, they had

no experience learning English as a foreign language themselves and therefore lacked techniques for teaching the language in a classroom situation. They were also exempt from participating in English proficiency courses during their training, which again led to them having fewer classroom skills. Many native speakers were also not fluent in Hebrew (the students' first language) and unfamiliar with the local culture, which also made it harder for them to cope.

For these reasons, it is important that teacher trainers and administrators of teacher-training programs for English teachers beware of being 'blinded' by native English speakers' high level of proficiency in the language and should ensure that they receive adequate training in order to become efficient teachers in the field.

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