

Non-native speakers of English teaching English in Japan -Critical Perspectives on TESOL in an Educational Context-

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Abstract

While some say that native speakers are the only language teachers who can be trusted, some say that having good English proficiency is just a part of the qualities a good English teacher should have. There is a scarcity of empirical studies that explore the differences between native and non-native teachers of English (Samimy and Brutte-griffler, cited in Braine, 1999, p.130).

This paper will discuss 'good English language teachers' focusing on the argument: whether native speakers are more appropriate than non-native speakers as language teachers in order to improve the overall English teaching situation in Japan.

1.0 Purpose

In his paper presented in 1990, Quirk states that native speakers are the only language teachers who can be trusted, since non-native speakers make mistakes that disqualify them as true purveyors of a language (cited in Christensen, 1992). Does this mean that non-native speakers cannot be qualified language teachers of another language? Conversely, is everyone necessarily a good language teacher of his or her native language? Finally, in their efforts to acquire English language skills and teacher qualifications, do non-native speakers develop a deep understanding of English, including a bilingual perspective that competes favorably with the majority of native English teachers in Japan? What, then, is the definition of native speakers of English? Quirk's statement raises many questions and doubts regarding the natural superiority of native speakers and the unsuitability of non-native instructors.

This paper will discuss 'good English language teachers' focusing on the argument : whether native speakers are more appropriate than non-native speakers as language teachers in relation to English language teaching situation and teachers in Japan. This discussion is based on critical perspectives and its goal is to find out what should be done in order to improve the overall English teaching situation in Japan.

2.0 Method

In spite of being one of the biggest markets for the 'English' industry in the world

(Koike and Tanaka, 1995), and its preference for native speakers in the industry, Japan's poor result in TOEFL examinations make us realize the need to examine the teaching situation and the role teachers play in the classroom. Today, I will examine the following three questions with literature and my experiences: the role of 'standard English' in teaching; the practical definition of "native English speakers" such as those found in Japan; and finally, the characteristics of a good language teacher.

3.0 Result and discussion

'Standard English' in Teaching

'Let's learn English conversation with us!' An advertisement with a photo of smiling faces is a common stereotype of English school notices in Japan. The smiling faces in the advertisement are usually young, good-looking, white, native English speakers. These kinds of advertisements of English conversation schools can be widely seen all over Japan. When we turn on TV in Japan, we can enjoy some English programs. The teachers or guests in these programs are usually white native speakers, who are mainly American. Naturally, these programs are often full of American accents and expressions. Lummis, an American political scientist, was "appalled by the assumption of cultural superiority of native-speaker Americans" in Japan. He says in an article entitled 'English Conversation as Ideology' (Phillipson, 2001, p.4), "the world of English conversation is racist. The expression 'native speaker' is in effect a code word for 'white', their real role is not language teacher but living example of American way of life".

What is 'English' or 'standard English'? It is a complex problem, and there are many ways to define these concepts. Lippi-Green says "The social domain of Standard English has been established: it is the language of the educated, in particular those who have achieved a high level of expertise in the written language. But this simple definition of Standard English is complicated when variation over space is considered (1997, p.56). She claims the importance of accent and discrimination is based on accent functions.

Phillipson (2001) describes 'English' from various perspectives, such as the influence of globalization, finance and the economy connected to Americanization, World Trade Organization, NGOs, and so on. English is the most widely used international language. English is used as an official or semi-official language in over 60 countries. It is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, medicine, diplomacy, sports, international competitions, pop music, and advertising (Crystal, 1987, cited in Pennycook, 1994). With colonialism, globalization and a variety of other factors, the use of English has been increasing throughout the world. Pennycook (1994) says "the standardization of English had

major ramifications for the construction of the discourse of EIL (English as an International Language), especially when we consider that an equation between standard English and the dominant international language was seen as an inevitable historical process” (p.117). Discourse of EIL cannot be isolated from the cultural and political contexts due to the historical process.

There is also an English teaching industry centered on Britain and U.S.A. While the British Council is the main mediator of ELT projects in Britain, the United States has consolidated its power through a various institutions such as, Ford, Rockefeller, Carnegie. The British Council was set up in 1935, to promote the spread of British culture, language and political system against the spread of European fascism. Pennycook claims that there is a constant recognition of its commercial and political role. The Council helps maintain the spread of English through its links overseas, by teaching English in its centers, offering teacher training courses, supplying a great many teaching materials, and trying to maintain standards of English teaching. The United States started to have the greatest influence in the post-war era (Pennycook, 1994). Judging from the main ELT business markets, it seems that English in Britain, the North America, Australia could be called ‘standard’ English in language teaching.

Definition of Native English Speakers

Defining native English speakers is a complex task. There are many factors to consider. *A Dictionary of Language Teaching of Applied Linguistics* (1992) explains that native speaker is “a person considered as a speaker of his or her Native Language...” The native language means “the language which a person acquires in early childhood because it is spoken in the family and/or it is the language of the country where he or she is living...” (p.241).

There is a scarcity of empirical studies that explore the differences between native and non-native teachers of English (Samimy and Brutt-Griffler, cited in Braine, 1999, p.130). Han (2004) describes that the construct of the native speaker is one of the least investigated and least understood in second language acquisition research, and illustrates the native speaker concept while reviewing Davies (1991; 2003). He refers to psycholinguistic, linguistic and sociolinguistic perspectives of how Davies defines the native speakers, as well as ambiguity of the native speaker concept. Yamaguchi says “if we consider ‘native’ to mean people whose first language is English, many people in countries of Asia and Africa may be recognized as native speakers (2001, p1). Amin, a Pakistan-born Ph.D. candidate at University of Toronto, claims that “referent of the ESL classroom is the (white) native speaker, and the ‘white accent’ as the constructed norm” (cited in Wlazlinski, 2001, p.4). According to Pennycook (1994),

the native speaker is the “idealized person with a complete and possible innate competence in the language” (p.175).

Pennycook claims the close tie to the political economy of global EFL; UK and US centered English-dominant nations maintain the native speaker as the preferred model and results in a language industry comprising of textbooks or forms of English teaching. According to this model, the native speaker refers only to Britons and Americans, which reminds us of the English BBC and American CNN. Canadian or Australian English is also included. Holliday (1994) calls BANA (Britain, Australia and North America) the center of native varieties of English (cited in Yamaguchi, 2001).

‘Standard’ English in Japanese Classrooms

The influence of U.S.A. and ELT industry can be seen in Japanese classrooms. Textbooks and tapes attached to the textbooks are full of American or British English expressions or accents. English is a foreign language in Japan, where there are little or no opportunities to speak in English. In an EFL situation like Japan, we could consider varieties of English in the world, including English spoken by Japanese, and which type of English to teach should be considered in accordance with students’ interests. However, according to Quirk (1990), only standard English in the classroom would seem to require the teacher to assume the role of socializing force, and native speakers are the only people who can be trusted, since non-native speakers make mistakes that disqualify them as true purveyors of a language. His lecture delivered at the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) in 1988 was stimulating and challenged many English teachers in Japan to think about important issues.

Christensen (1992) describes Quirk’s concerns for standard English as an attempt to promote the standards of a minority, privileged group of language users. While native speakers can speak English without making mistakes, non-native local teachers can understand their students’ culture and communicate with their students in their language, which is more important in teaching. There is necessity to know students’ preference or opinions.

A study by Chiba, Matsuura and Yamamoto (1995) shows Japanese college students have a more positive attitude toward American English and accent than to other native or non-native varieties. Their next study (Chiba et al, 1995) indicates a favorable response of Japanese university students toward native accents rather than to non-native accents. A recording was done of nine male speakers. Three of them were Japanese university students. Another three were native speakers of English: two Americans and one British person. The other three were non-native speakers of English from countries where English is spoken as a

second language: Sri Lanka, Hong Kong, and Malaysia. Each speaker read the same short English passage.

They state that their results may stem from the students' familiarity with American or British English taped materials. Other findings confirm that subjects showing supportive reactions to American or British people, culture, and language were less approving of non-native accents. They also suggest necessity to encourage students to accept and pay more attention to different varieties of English (Chiba et al, 1995). No matter what English accent we have, however, the accent should be comprehensible to people, regardless of nationalities.

Good English Language Teachers

Language learning is unique, and language teachers' influence on learners is much greater than that of other subjects' teachers. Tsui states that a language learning process is stressful and tends to generate much anxiety in the learners (1996). The results of a qualitative study reveals that 'teacher' is the second biggest factor in both positive and negative experiences of English language studying by Japanese university students (Nakata, 2003). This makes us realize one of the important factors language teachers need to have.

Tsuchiya (1995) states some conditions to become a good English teacher. There are four main conditions; good English proficiency, knowledge of English language and its cultural background with comparative perspective to Japanese language and culture, being good at teaching with knowledge of language acquisition, and well-rounded personality. He claims that having good English proficiency is just a part of the conditions. If having good English proficiency is everything, any native speaker of English could be an English teacher, which is not realistic.

Being a native speaker of a language does not mean being a good teacher of the language. It is not easy to teach a foreign language unless we know how to teach. Even if it is our mother tongue, it is not easy. Having good language skills does not always mean being able to teach the language well. Without language learning experience and teaching skills, it is hard to teach and become a good teacher when we consider the teachers' great influence on their students.

Studying a foreign language is time-consuming and requires a lot of patience and endeavors. The only teachers that have studied a foreign language can understand how their students feel and realize the importance and difficulty of the learning process. Language teachers need to understand what hardships their students have, which makes teachers understand their students better, and makes teachers learner-centered. It is important for an ESL/EFL teacher to be an accomplished user of English, an expert, rather than being

advantaged as a native speaker. Non-native English language teachers can show a successful model to students in language learning. Native English speakers or bilingual teachers need to understand and satisfy these conditions.

Compared with well-trained native English-speaking teachers, Japanese English teachers are more advanced in their knowledge and understanding of Japanese language and culture compared with their perspective of English language and culture. This enables them to connect with their students better, since they are Japanese. Being good at teaching is also important, as is understanding language acquisition and having various strategies for teaching. It is necessary to keep studying and developing teaching skills.

Another important factor is personality. No matter how well the teachers can instruct and communicate in English, or have knowledge in various fields, the teachers should have a well-rounded personality and a passion for teaching. The teachers must not oppress the students by manipulating their authority as the teacher. Being a good English teacher is more than being a native speaker of English. Non-native speakers of English could be better English teachers if they satisfy the conditions mentioned above, as well as keep making efforts to improve their skills, knowledge and personality.

Teachers influence their students greatly. The job of the teacher is very complex. It may involve presenting a model of acceptable behavior to children and teenagers, encouraging and motivating them, and acting as a source of advice on a whole range of matters relating to their studies and their personal lives (Desforges, 1995). Teachers can also benefit by making themselves develop through interaction with students.

4.0 Conclusion or summary

In conclusion, this paper explored the concept of teaching English in Japan, focusing on which is better, native or non-native English teachers, with reference to the literature and my own personal experience. The job of teachers is demanding, challenging, and very important. Teachers in Japan are said to be too busy and overworked. An increasing number of parents take it for granted that teachers or schools should take all responsibility on children's education or discipline. Teachers are expected to do many things, whether they are non-native speakers of English or not. The circumstances under which teachers work are becoming more stressful. Effective measures should be taken to improve this situation.

While teachers' social status in the society is high and teachers are respected in some sense in Japan, it is often said that schools are a closed society and some teachers' way of thinking is biased. It might be caused by the characteristics of teaching job or condition; too much workload or too long working hours, and having power as soon as becoming

teachers against their students even though they are so young and don't have enough various experiences to see through the nature of things or people. Some teachers are too busy to have good relationship with other teachers, and to talk with people with different professions to expand their way of thinking. The way of recruiting or the system of adopting teachers should be reformed; for instance, adding a requirement of two-year working experience for instance, adding a requirement of two-year working experience for private companies or various activities of submitting recommendation letters from previous working or activity place.

English teachers, whether they are native or non-native speakers of English, should have both good English and Japanese language proficiency to teach in Japan. It is not true that native speakers of English are the only qualified teachers. It is more important for ESL/EFL teachers to be accomplished users of English--experts--rather than being advantaged as native speakers of English. Having a language learning experience is important.

Learning a foreign language expands the persons' way of thinking and learners gain a variety of new knowledge or views. Philipson says, "Monolingual English speakers are depriving themselves of a great deal of linguistic and cultural sensitivity if they are confined to the worldview of a single language, however widespread and varied this language is" (2001, p.1). The important thing is, not whether teachers should be native or non-native speakers of English, but whether a teacher is a good English teacher or not.

JET Program (The Japan Exchange and teaching Program) has earned a high reputation, both in Japan and overseas although there are some problems such as no clear guidelines provided for integrating team in the program. Since native English speakers invited by the JET program play important roles in teaching as well as in human and culture exchanges, it might be one of the good examples for both native speakers of English or non-native speakers of English teaching English together in Japan. Both native and non-native speakers should cooperate and work together to enhance their students' communicative abilities.

Teachers should be student-centered and have well-balanced personality and way of thinking. Teachers need to keep studying to develop their knowledge and teaching skills as well as their personality. Working conditions should be improved to allow teachers to have more time, improve their skills and to expand their views. However, even if the working environment is ideal, it is useless unless teachers have the will to improve themselves. The most important factor in being a good English teacher depends on the teachers themselves.

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