

Attitudes and Awareness to Nonnative English Educators (NNEST)– Reflections from TESOL Conference in San Antonio, Texas

During my demonstration of teaching ESL using technology at TESOL, as I was typing a sentence up on the screen and explaining one of my activities, a member of the audience interrupted me to ask where I was from. If I had been in Brazil, I would have said in a very humorous tone, “But of course my nationality has everything to do with technology...” but since I am in a country where ethnicity is a political issue (I don’t know any other country where I am asked my ethnic group in every form I fill out), without taking my eyes from the keyboard, I sharply said, “Brazil. I am from Brazil, but I have been in the U.S. for 6 years,” and continued my explanation. Silly me! To my surprise, she cut in again saying, “Oh, sorry. I wanted to know where you *teach*. You don’t need to get defensive. I know you are a great teacher.”

She was right. Being a nonnative speaker of English doesn’t make me less of an ESL instructor. The primary reassurance of how professional I am is what my students answer when I ask them what they feel about having a NNEST (nonnative English speaking teacher) in anonymous surveys that I give in my credit classes. The responses are divided into criticizing “Americans,” praising my nonnativeness, being indifferent, to valuing the professionalism beyond my nationality status. Some quotations:

- “American teachers are lazy, you write long comments.”
- “You teach me how to be successful as a foreigner because you succeeded as a stranger too.”
- “The English words won’t change, the grammar won’t change, and the way how to speak won’t change, what else will change? So, if a teacher know these skills well, it really doesn’t matter whether he or she is a non-native speaker.”
- “No. there is lots of educators in the US who are not native speakers have done very good jobs in their careers. And I think it is the school’s responsibility to set a standard that a qualified educator has to meet”
- “In the first, I wanted an American teacher to teach me pronunciation, but you explained me how to speak better intonation and clear and you give me many advice in the oral tape. You are professional.”

Have I ever gotten negative responses? Yes, many. One student wrote, “Ms. Wu is a mean teacher. You will have your difficult time if you can not complete the assignment according to her requirement.” But in regard to my being a non-native speaker of English, I believe I never got any negative response because students sensed how professional I am, and they knew from day one that my expectations and standards are high. So, if my students respect me, I have to stop being oversensitive about being a NNEST when I am among professionals.

If you are a NNEST and tend to be either quiet in the closet or act like a live bomb ready to explode just like me, I suggest that you join a NNEST Caucus in TESOL or CATESOL. From my experience at TESOL, it was very helpful to talk to other NNESTs. These organizations are one of the most visible and active in the ELT arena,

and they not only support NNESTs, but also intend to increase awareness of common NNEST needs and strengths, build collaboration between NNESTs and NESTs (native English speaking teachers), as well as heighten awareness about ways to respond to prejudice and bias against NNESTs. In addition to joining professional organizations, it is always a good idea to apply for mentoring programs where you will be paired with a leader or write articles sharing your experiences. And who knows, you might even get paid for your contribution. For example, TESOL offers a cash award of \$1,000 to NNESTs who want to participate in their Leadership Mentoring Program and \$250 for outstanding articles on NNEST issues.

I don't know (but I would like to) how many NNESTs there are teaching ESL at CCSF. Whatever the number, I strongly believe it is important for the entire faculty, NNESTs and NESTs alike, to become aware that discussions related to nonnative-English speaking educators and the world of Englishes (Kachru, 1998; Pennycook, 2001; Braine, 1999; Medyes, 1992) have increased tremendously, as well as the number of international students attending graduate programs in TESL and the number of NNESTs teaching ESL in the U.S. and Canada.

In fact, at TESOL, I attended a workshop that described graduate programs at the University of Manitoba and the University of Ontario, designed specifically for NNEST candidates who wish to teach ESL in the Canadian educational system. Besides learning pedagogical methods and theories in teaching ESL, these graduate students learn communication and classroom management strategies pertaining to NNEST perspectives, among other skills that will help them be employable and accepted among staff. But this is Canada.....

It has been said that NNEST is not just a Caucus; it's a movement (Matsuda, 2002). Unfortunately, not everyone is aware of or prepared for this movement. This summer, I was involved in a VESL project for foreign nurses. Apparently, what the management perceived as linguistic flaws was, after placing assessment tests and conducting informal interviews, a deficiency in cross-cultural communication and intolerance for a variety of English. I believe that this kind of conflict between NNEST and NES happens in every workplace in the bay area because some people are not fully embracing diversity.

With this "movement" in mind, I believe that in our ESL department, it is time to give special attention and consideration when accommodating international MA-TESOL students from SFSU in their practicum. Besides giving them opportunities to gain teaching experience, we need to learn how to be supportive and how to help these teachers-in-preparation close some of their knowledge gaps. More importantly, we need to be honest in their evaluations, placing more emphasis on identifying flaws and giving constructive feedback which will encourage them for self-improvement. The hiring committee might consider revising the criteria and the guidelines for measuring proficiency and expertise when evaluating NNEST candidates during the hiring process, and the personnel committee would be prudent to start considering NNEST issues in their discussions.

In conferences, I always notice how we from the bay area are very proud of our diverse community. But in the same manner that we are extensively trained to deal with diversity *in the classroom*, we also need to bring that open-mindedness and start accepting diversity *in our staff*.

In my case, I am still learning to cool down and consider that when a colleague asks me where I come from, she might actually be asking me where I teach.

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