

Preparing non-native English-speaking ESL teachers

Author: Sarah J. Shin ^a

Affiliation: ^a Department of Education, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, USA

DOI: 10.1080/13664530701827749

Publication Frequency: 4 issues per year

Published in: [Teacher Development](#), Volume [12](#), Issue [1](#) February 2008 , pages 57 - 65

Abstract

This article addresses the challenges that non-native English-speaking teacher trainees face as they begin teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in Western, English-speaking countries. Despite a great deal of training, non-native speaker teachers may be viewed as inadequate language teachers because they often lack native speaker competence in the target language and culture. However, non-native speaker teachers possess distinct advantages over native speakers including a deeper understanding of learners' first languages and an ability to explain second language features in ways that students can understand. This article explores the linguistic and pedagogical skills that are required for teaching ESL to immigrant students in primary and secondary schools. It concludes that while it is important for non-native teachers to continuously strive to attain high levels of written and oral proficiencies in English, they must also become familiar with the discourse and cultures of the schools and communities in which they work. In addition, non-native teacher candidates need to be trained to become ethnographers of their own and others' interactions and draw on the knowledge about the different ways of learning and using language to grow as teachers and professionals. This article provides specific suggestions for teacher education programs to better prepare non-native teachers to meet these challenges.

Keywords: non-native English-speaking teachers; NNEST; TESOL teacher education; teacher identity; critical pedagogy

Introduction

Some time ago, I contacted an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teacher, at a local elementary school, to explore the possibility of placing one of our post-graduate ESL teacher candidates for student teaching internship in her classroom. As one of our trusted mentor teachers, she had maintained a favorable relationship with our teacher training program and had already supervised three of our former teacher trainees. So I was caught off guard when the teacher said, 'You are not sending me another student from X (name of a country), are you?' When I replied 'No', she said with a sigh of relief, 'Good.' Then she added, apologetically, 'Well, it's not that students from X are not good. It's just that they seem to have a steeper learning curve. And with all this testing, we just don't have the manpower [sic] to mentor them so closely. We need self-starters who can plug in our classrooms and learn quickly.'

Later in the conversation, I learned that the teachers in her school were concerned about the apparent lack of linguistic and cultural competence of our student from X, who not only

rubbed up one of the teachers the wrong way (seemingly due to this teacher trainee's cross-cultural misunderstandings) but, also, made regular errors in English when addressing the young students. I had already known from observing some of our former non-native teacher trainees in schools that there were, sometimes, issues with their language and cultural skills but had not thought that they were serious enough to cause the schools to actively shun them as student interns.

In the past, almost all of the international students returned to their home countries to teach English as a Foreign Language upon receiving their degrees in the United States. In recent years, however, an increasing number of our international students have chosen to stay in the US to teach ESL in local primary and secondary schools. This is partly in response to a critical shortage of ESL teachers in US schools but, also because of the belief that teaching experience in a Western, English-speaking country (for example Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK, US), makes the non-native teachers more marketable as English teachers back home. Almost all of our international graduates who have taken this path are currently teaching in some of the poorest school districts where classrooms are often crowded and resources strapped, and where many immigrant children arrive with limited or interrupted formal schooling from their home countries. Many of these teachers are working under stressful conditions, made more dreadful in recent years by constant pressure to raise student scores on annual standardized tests.

In a recent informal survey of the non-native teachers who have graduated from our program during the past five years and are currently working in ESL programs in primary and secondary schools in the US, I found that many are disillusioned, overworked and frustrated. They are often thrown into challenging environments with little or no guidance for professional development and, are having to navigate the culture of American schools largely by trial and error. Currently, very few Western-based, post-graduate Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) programs offer coursework and training that are specifically tailored to meet the needs of this population; and little research has been reported on the issues facing non-native teachers as they work in ESL programs in primary and secondary schools. This is despite the fact that nearly 40% of the teacher trainees enrolled in those programs are non-native English speakers (D. Liu [1999](#)). In this article, I review the linguistic and pedagogical skills that are necessary to teach English as a second language to immigrant students in primary and secondary schools and, what teacher education programs can do to better prepare non-native (as well as native) teachers. First, I turn to a discussion of the distinction between native and non-native speakers.

The native/non-native distinction

A central question that possibly characterizes the non-native English-speaking teacher literature is, 'who is best qualified to teach English - the native or the non-native teacher?' Many studies have described the relative strengths and weaknesses of native and non-native teachers by investigating student and/or teacher perceptions through surveys, interviews and journals (see chapters in Braine [1999](#); Kamhi-Stein [2004](#)). For example, native speakers are assumed to be superior in linguistic competence as compared to non-native speakers and are considered owners of proper, authentic English (see also, Widdowson [1994](#)). On the other

hand, non-native English speaking teachers are credited with more conscious knowledge of grammar, language learning experience that they can share with learners, serving as good models and, the ability to empathize with language learners (see, Braine [1999](#)).

Whatever the relative advantages or disadvantages of being a (non-)native speaker of a language may be, the native/non-native division is one of the most difficult and elusive concepts to define in language teaching. Some scholars contend that the native/non-native speaker distinction does not exist (Rampton [1990](#)) or that it is impossible to determine (Davies [1991](#)), while others insist upon actively dismantling this distinction (Kachru and Nelson [1996](#); Amin [2004](#)). Amin ([2004](#), 74) argues that the native speaker model divides the English language teaching profession according to a caste system and that it should be eliminated. Kachru and Nelson ([1996](#)) argue that viewing teachers through the lens of the native/non-native dichotomy maintains a monocultural and monolingual point of reference.

Widdowson ([1994](#)) suggests that teaching English is not a biological quality but a craft, a skill that has to be learned and mastered. Widdowson states that when the emphasis is moved from the contexts of use to contexts of learning, the advantage that native speaker teachers have disappears. He argues that native speakers have 'no say... no right to intervene or pass judgment' on how English develops internationally ([1994](#), 385). Widdowson also notes that giving priority to the use of authentic, naturally occurring English for instructional purposes privileges native speaker teachers, making them 'custodians and arbiters not only of proper English but of proper pedagogy as well' ([1994](#), 387).

Many scholars contend that the native/non-native label is too simplistic and that it fails to capture the rich complexities associated with being a user of a language (J. Liu [1999](#); Lazaraton [2003](#)). Rampton ([1990](#)) encourages the use of other labels and terms to describe the knowledge and language proficiency of a skilled language user; for example, he proposes to use the term 'language expertise' rather than 'native' or 'non-native'. He argues that, 'the notion of expert shifts the emphasis from "who you are" to "what you know"' (1990, 99). Cook ([1999](#)) suggests that language teaching would benefit by paying attention to the second language user rather than concentrating primarily on the native speaker (Cook [1999](#), 185). He argues that skilled, second language users should be viewed as 'successful multicompetent speakers, not failed native speakers' (1999, 204).

Despite the many problems associated with the native/non-native label, in many countries, highly trained non-native speaking local teachers are routinely turned down for English teaching positions because of the common belief that native English speaking teachers are superior. This is an unquestioned assumption that has been called the 'native speaker fallacy' (Phillipson [1992](#); Canagarajah [1999](#)). The TESOL Position Statement on Teacher Quality in the Field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL [2003](#)) states, 'English language learners, whether in an English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) setting, have the right to be taught by qualified and trained teachers. Native speaker proficiency in the target language alone is not a sufficient qualification for such teaching positions ... Qualified ESL and EFL educators not only should demonstrate a high level of written and oral proficiency in the English language (regardless of native language), but also should demonstrate teaching competency'. This statement describes qualified teachers as those who can not only serve as good language models but, also explain target language features in ways that students can understand. In addition, it

directly contradicts the notion that the ideal teacher of English is simply a native speaker of that language.

Having established that a good teacher of English is not necessarily a native English speaker, I discuss, below, the linguistic and pedagogical skills that are necessary in order to teach ESL in primary and secondary schools.

What linguistic expertise is necessary to teach ESL in primary and secondary schools?

The TESOL statement is very clear in that English language teachers must demonstrate a high level of written and oral proficiency in English. Having an excellent command of the target language is indeed one of the most important characteristics of outstanding foreign language teachers (D. Liu [1999](#); Medgyes [1999](#); Lee [2004](#)). How do non-native teacher trainees in typical North American TESOL programs fare in terms of language proficiency? My experience in working with teacher trainees over the years indicates that while there are certainly non-native teachers with native-like command of English, the majority of the teachers are in the 'average' rank-and-file category (to borrow the phrase used by Medgyes [1999](#), 14-15), whose lack of fluent command of English is a source of constant stress, since they do less well in every aspect of language performance compared to native speakers with otherwise comparable backgrounds.

For non-native speakers who have not had regular and extensive contact with English and, therefore, have not had the opportunity to develop high levels of written and oral proficiencies, the psychological stress of teaching English can be overwhelming. Lee ([2004](#)) states that in Hong Kong, the public has lost confidence in local non-native teachers whose low proficiencies in English are largely blamed for the poor English performance of students. This has led the Hong Kong government to establish standards of language competence expected of English teachers and the administration of a benchmarking test. Lee reported that the majority of the English teachers did not pass the tests, which was immediately criticized by the Hong Kong media. Many teachers are undeniably discouraged, given the tough task of salvaging the public's eroding confidence in their ability to teach English (Lee [2004](#), 233).

The fear of being viewed by students, fellow teachers and administrators as incompetent teachers may be equally, if not more, significant for non-native teachers in Western, English-speaking countries. In a study of non-native student interns in American schools, Brady and Gulikers ([2004](#): 212) found that although the teacher trainees explicitly denied any insecurity due to their language proficiency, other comments suggested that their English was, sometimes, a concern. For example, teacher trainees generally expressed discomfort about being asked by the host instructor to participate in class activities without advance warning. They wanted to be notified so they could prepare in advance and avoid 'not having the language ready'. Some of Kamhi-Stein's ([1999](#)) teacher trainees told her that since they speak what they call 'a deficient variety of English', they are 'qualified only to play the role of assistants of native English-speaking teachers' (Kamhi-Stein [1999](#), 149). Ultimately, non-native teachers command of English affects their self-image as professionals, which in turn, influences the way they teach (Medgyes [1999](#)).

It is important to note, however, that language competence is not confined to discrete language skills and grammatical knowledge. Once placed in the schools, many non-native English-speaking teachers quickly discover that they know less social language than their immigrant students, who are growing up in America. Since their own schooling took place in other countries, many of the non-native teachers lack cultural backgrounds to interpret and participate appropriately in the discourses of American schools. What non-native teachers need (in fact, what every teacher needs regardless of whether he/she is native or non-native) is pragmatic knowledge and an understanding of the discourse of American schools, to help them negotiate social language in such settings (Gee [2002](#)). According to Gee ([2002](#)), a discourse is composed of distinctive ways of being and doing which allow people to enact a specific socially-situated identity. Thus, what teacher trainees need is the knowledge of using social language consistent with their identities as teachers of immigrant children.

What pedagogical expertise is necessary to teach ESL in primary and secondary schools?

In order to determine what pedagogical expertise is required of ESL teachers, we must first be clear about the goals of learning English for immigrant students. To be successful in school and in the larger society outside school, immigrant children need to master both social and academic English (TESOL [1997](#)). It is not enough for immigrant students to achieve conversational fluency in English, which can often be attained in a year or two through informal social interactions. What immigrant students need is ESL instruction that is designed to develop their academic English, which is necessary for 'unrestricted access to grade-appropriate instruction in challenging academic subjects' (TESOL [1997](#), 1-2). Children do not learn academic language on their own or simply through immersion in an English-speaking environment. Mastering academic English requires instructional activities that actively promote language development in the context of learning intellectually challenging content (Cummins [2000](#); Bielenberg and Wong Fillmore [2004/2005](#)).

ESL classes in which activities focus primarily on discrete language skills and isolated

vocabulary will not help students to develop academic language (Valdés [2001](#)).

Moreover, classes in which students are discouraged from talking to one another, where they primarily fill out worksheets and, where the teachers ask only low-level questions answerable with one word, will not provide the kind of input that learners need in order to acquire academic language (Wong Fillmore [1985](#)). What will promote academic literacy is high-quality instruction that integrates both language and content.

In integrated language and content courses, ESL teachers teach content (mathematics, science) to English learners using curriculum units that help students to acquire content knowledge while developing English language skills. The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model (Echevarria et al. [2004](#)) offers one example of a lesson-planning and delivery approach in which teachers use the regular core curriculum and modify their teaching to make the content understandable for English learners. In this model, teachers examine their curricula from a language perspective and identify the linguistic demands of the content course. For example, does the course require students to write comparison/

contrast or problem/solution essays? Does the course require students to read a textbook and take notes? Do students have to give oral presentations using technical vocabulary? All these common classroom tasks require academic language proficiency. Since language and content must be taught in an integrated manner, ESL teachers will need to focus on real academic content while teaching reading, writing, listening and speaking skills on the topics covered. In addition, ESL teachers may need to collaborate with subject area teachers, in order to plan both content and language objectives for lessons and co-teach some content classes.

In addition to teaching content-based language, teachers need to know that English learners come from diverse socioeconomic, educational and linguistic backgrounds. While some children read and write above grade level in their native language, others have had limited or interrupted schooling. Some enter school highly motivated to learn while others have had negative school experiences. Some come from middle-class families; others live in poverty. Some students who speak Romance languages (such as Spanish) may have the benefit of recognizing English cognates of words they already know (*humanity* and *humanidad*), while students who speak other languages do not have this advantage. Whatever the case may be, students of all different backgrounds must be provided with access to the curriculum and learn subject-matter content while learning English. However, helping immigrant children to keep up and catch up with curriculum continues to be one of the most significant challenges

facing schools (Valdés [2001](#)).

Perhaps a central challenge to educating children from minority groups living in low income families, is the teacher's lack of knowledge of the discourses and worlds of their students. Middle-class (mostly white) professionals teaching in multiracial, low-income schools, have little in common with their students and communities in terms of language and culture (Delpit and Dowdy [2002](#); Howard [2006](#)). When a significant difference exists between school culture and children's home culture, teachers can misread students' abilities or intent and use instructional and discipline measures that are at odds with community norms (Heath [1983](#); Delpit [1995](#)). Middle-class teachers are often 'appalled by what they see of poor parents, and most do not have the training or the ability to see past surface behaviors to the meanings behind parents' actions' (Delpit [1995](#), 175). Teachers harbor prejudices about people from ethnic groups or classes different from their own because they have been conditioned by the larger society's negative stereotypes of certain ethnic groups and, are never given the opportunity to learn to value the experiences of other groups (Delpit [1995](#), 179).

Understanding the culture of low-income, high-minority schools and communities is a challenge for both middle-class American teachers and non-native teachers from abroad. Both groups are equally foreign to this setting and need to become aware of children's lives outside of school, so as to recognize and teach to their strengths. Teachers need to understand how painful it can be for immigrant and American children from minority backgrounds to assimilate to the dominant culture and, look for ways to help their students make the transition to school without giving up their home languages and cultures (Igoa [1995](#)). In addition, teachers need to explore their own beliefs and attitudes about non-white and non-middle-class people and, recognize how schools privilege the world views of those in power and discredit those of the less powerful (McLaren [1995](#); Howard [2006](#)).

Conclusion and implications for teacher education programs

This article discussed some of the major challenges facing non-native English-speaking teacher candidates as they begin teaching English as a Second Language to immigrant students in Western, English-speaking countries. When measured against the language competence of native English-speaking teachers, non-native teachers almost always fall short, which is one of the chief reasons why native speakers have traditionally been favored as English teachers. Furthermore, non-native teachers may lack cultural understandings and the social language to navigate professional relationships with colleagues and students in a foreign setting. However, non-native teachers possess clear advantages over native teachers such as a greater, conscious knowledge of grammar, language learning experience that they can share with learners and, the ability to empathize with language learners. This article argued that, in order for non-native teachers to be successful, they need to continuously improve their own skills in written and oral English and become familiar with the culture and discourse of the schools and communities in which they work.

Given these needs, what sort of training can teacher education programs provide to help non-native speakers become effective ESL teachers? First, to help teacher trainees develop appropriate instructional English, teacher training courses might incorporate 'classroom language' training in which the forms of English that teachers use when interacting with students may be analyzed and practiced, including both direct and indirect ways for encouraging student participation, techniques for establishing classroom rules and boundaries for misbehavior, as well as different means for praising students (D. Liu [1999](#)). Non-native teacher candidates may also work collaboratively with their native English speaking peers on group projects and activities, sharing their respective areas of expertise and learning to relate to one another. Teacher candidates should be provided with opportunities to improve their written and spoken English throughout their teacher training program, through language courses that are designed for the non-native English speaking teacher in mind. The goal of these courses will be to help participants achieve fluent and idiomatic use of the English language, rather than native-like pronunciation or intonation (D. Liu [1999](#), 204). These courses will also help students write in English for specific purposes and receive feedback on their writing.

Furthermore, non-native teacher trainees should be supported to develop their English outside the classroom. In our post-graduate ESL teacher education program, we routinely refer our international teacher trainees to on-campus employment and volunteer opportunities so as to help them to learn to use authentic English in various contexts. We also provide social programs in which non-native teachers can informally socialize with their native colleagues. These opportunities help non-native teachers to improve their English, as well as to learn social customs and culturally appropriate behaviors. Non-native teachers are also encouraged to expand their linguistic range by reading a wide variety of materials for pleasure in English. They are also encouraged to participate in local and national professional organizations by volunteering in conferences and giving presentations.

In terms of learning the discourse of schools, one of the main responsibilities of teacher educators, practicum supervisors and mentor teachers should be scaffolding teacher trainees

through active reflection of the social practices in schools. Teacher trainees should be introduced explicitly to appropriate ways of approaching their host instructor with requests for feedback and assistance, features of classroom talk and the nature of relationships between mentor and apprentice (Brady and Gulikers [2004](#)). They should also become familiar with culturally appropriate ways of relating to colleagues and administrators, as well as students and parents. Understanding the cultures and, discourses of immigrant children and parents is a particularly important skill for ESL teachers and Heath ([1983](#)) recommends teachers learn to become ethnographers of their own and others' interactions and to put to use knowledge about the different ways of learning and using language, which exist in the communities of their region (Heath [1983](#), 265-66).

Specifically, parents and community members may be invited to the university classroom to tell prospective teachers what their concerns about education are, what they feel schools are doing well or poorly for their children and, how they would like to see schooling changed (Delpit [1995](#), 179). In addition, teacher trainees may spend some time learning to act as ethnographers in interactions in the homes and workplaces of the communities in which children live (Heath [1983](#)). Teacher trainees may tape-record talk-in-interaction and interview members of their students' families and communities - focusing on ways of learning and using language. The practicum seminar can then examine the interactional patterns of mainstream Americans, teacher trainees' own language and habits and, ways in which students language and habits are judged by the discourse norms of the communities.

The practicum seminar can also be a place in which discussions regarding the relative advantages and disadvantages of being a native/non-native teacher take place (Samimy and Brutt-Griffler [1999](#)). As language learners themselves, non-native teachers have perhaps more acute insights into the processes of language learning and what it means to be a speaker of a minority language, in a majority language environment. They may bring a broader world view and insights into the sociopolitical implications of learning and, may be using a language that belongs not only to native speakers but also to an increasing number of users of indigenized or localized varieties of English around the world (Kachru [1992](#); Jenkins [2006](#)). Furthermore, non-native teachers have the potential to push the limits of standard norms of language use, to express their unique experiences as immigrants or foreigners (Kramsch and Lam [1999](#)). Frequent and open discussions on various personal and sociopolitical aspects of being minority speakers, when coupled with comprehensive teacher training, can empower non-native teachers to realize their potential as teachers of all students, whatever the familial, educational and personal background may be.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to George Braine and two anonymous *Teacher Development* reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

Notes on Contributor

Sarah J. Shin is Associate Professor of Education and Co-Director of the MA Program in ESOL/Bilingual Education at the University of Maryland Baltimore County. Her professional specializations are bilingualism, TESOL teacher education and second language writing. She has a particular interest in the education of language minority students and the maintenance

of heritage languages and cultures. Her recent publications include her book, *Developing in two languages: Korean children in America* (Multilingual Matters, 2005); and articles, “High-stakes testing and heritage language maintenance” (In Kondo-Brown, K., ed. *Heritage language development: Focus on East Asian immigrants*, 2006); “For immigrant students, the ESOL glass is half full” (*Essential Teacher*, 2007); and, “Learning to teach writing through tutoring and journal writing” (*Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 2006). With Jin Sook Lee, she has edited a special themed issue of the *Heritage Language Journal* on Korean (in press). Most recently, she has been investigating the development of academic English by immigrant students in high schools.

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