

The advantages of NNESTs – Non-native English-speaking teachers – as role models in international schools.

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‘English is an international auxiliary language. It is yours (no matter who you are) as much as it is mine (no matter who I am). ... No one needs to become more like Americans ... or any other English speaker to lay claim on the language. ... It isn’t even necessary to appreciate the culture of a country whose principal language is English in order for one to use it effectively. This argument assumes a much more complex view of the identities of second language learners in world English contexts.’ (Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2006: 442)

In the last edition of *ISJ*, Martyna Elerian raised the issue of ‘Internationally-Minded EAL education’, and its lack of recognition in the International School context. In this article, I should like to build on Elerian’s welcome insights by showing more specifically the reasons for this lack, and thus hopefully change mindsets and approaches.

Many international schools, especially those named ‘The British International School of Xxx’, proclaim prominently on their websites that ‘All our teachers are British native speakers’. A typical headline will be ‘The school provides a comprehensive international education based on the National Curriculum for England, taught by fully qualified and experienced native English-speaking teachers. Our school is the only one in Xxx whose teachers are all native English speakers.’

When school heads or boards of governors make the decision to employ only native English speakers, they are unwittingly making a crucial mistake. Potentially bilingual ESL students (or ELL learners, or EAL pupils – the terminology changes according to location and fashion) will see only monolingual English speakers as their teachers and take that as the ideal. School heads must understand what is at stake and speak forcefully to governors and parents so that they understand how much better the ESL students would progress if they could interact with teachers who were bilinguals, like them; that their chances of developing a native-like English accent after puberty were minimal; and that there are more SL (second language) speakers of English than native speakers in the world. The professionalism and competence of SL English speakers who are teachers of ESL is often outstanding; they compare favourably with the too often seen amateurism of ‘native speakers’, who are frequently poorly qualified. Indeed, native English speakers can actually be worse communicators than SL speakers of English. Morrison (2016) writes, ‘often you have a boardroom full of people from different

countries communicating in English and all understanding each other and then suddenly the American or Brit walks into the room and nobody can understand them'. The reason for this is that 'The non-native speakers ... speak more purposefully and carefully, typical of someone speaking a second or third language. Anglophones ... often talk too fast for others to follow, and use jokes, slang and references specific to their own culture.' Morrison quotes Jenkins: "Native speakers are at a disadvantage when you are in a lingua franca situation," where English is being used as a common denominator, says Jennifer Jenkins, professor of global Englishes at the UK's University of Southampton. "It's the native English speakers that are having difficulty understanding and making themselves understood."

In schools whose ESL teachers come from a system like that of England, in which they are not given professional status and have become inured to being in a support role, it is likely that content teachers who see them do not speak out even though they may believe that there might be something that they could do about the situation. These content teachers may be victims of the *'bystander effect'*, or *'hegemonic common sense'*, by which the more that people have seen of a problem and the way it is dealt with, the more likely they are to ignore their own judgement. This is a strong factor working against ESL teachers in British-style international schools. With globalization, language has become an issue needing a global response, and is thus particularly prone to the bystander effect. People look around to see what others are doing and saying, or more pertinently what they are **not** doing or saying. Social conformity is a strong behavioural instinct built into people's core psychology. In earlier stages of human development not doing the same as others around us could entail ostracism or abandonment. There are often risks involved in holding views that are not in step with your social group. In addition, if an ESL teacher is repeatedly out of step with the English-speaking peer-group majority, the threat of dismissal is always present; the choice is to speak out on the issues and be fired, or be silent, swallow, and sit in classes in a support role. ESL teachers have written to me about precisely this scenario, in real fear of losing their jobs. In such cases these teachers are experiencing continual 'moral injury' - feeling forced into acting against professional and personal conscience.

It needs repeating that the monolingual English teachers and administrators are the ones who are out of step, as the student body is usually multilingual. Experiments on social conformity have shown that people conform even when there is a real threat, so a strong school leader will be needed who is determined to maintain a professional ESL department, and school boards should be encouraged to take a long look at policies of only employing native English speakers. This raises another potential problem: the Board of Governors may feel that such a

strong leader does not have the backing of the staff, or is upsetting them, so will not renew her contract. When in a majority on a school staff, English speakers face two risks: the uncertain risk of bilingualism compared with the certain and very personal risk of opposing the norm of English-only, or not developing a professional ESL and mother-tongue programme.

Lynskey affirms: ‘Humans do not instinctively enjoy changing their minds. Admitting that you were wrong, especially when the original decision has huge ramifications, is a painful and destabilising experience that the brain tends to resist. Research into this kind of denial has given us concepts such as cognitive dissonance and confirmation bias.’

‘When you have a strong view about something, you’re likely to reject information that’s contrary to your view, reject the source of the information and rationalise the information,’ says Jane Green, professor of political science at the University of Manchester ‘We select information that’s consistent with our views, because it’s more comfortable and reaffirming.’ In fact, it’s physically pleasurable. Some recent studies of *confirmation bias* indicate that consuming information that supports our beliefs actually produces a dopamine rush.’ (Lynskey, 2017)

Further examples of how large organizations are unable to adapt to a more appropriate path are given by Meek: ‘We live in an era where large corporations’ trappings of openness – bright, friendly, content-rich websites and well-staffed PR operations – turn out to be facades for gagged workforces, denial of corporate history and a refusal to engage with sceptical questions.’ (Meek, 2015: 266)

There is also ‘*self-categorization theory*’, by which people not only identify strongly with their own social group but believe that it has a distinctive identity that makes it superior to other groups. Thus in schools where a Board of Governors may, apparently with good intentions, have insisted on recruiting only native British English speakers, there will be a body that will be wide open to confirmation bias and ‘*the white man effect*’. The white man effect describes how a certain group of the ‘unconvinced’ are almost always strongly conservative in politics, tend to be from more powerful social groups, and are very likely to be men – in our case perhaps the school head. They display a low level of risk perception in areas of language discrimination so that others will not want to take them on. This can lead to ‘*pluralistic ignorance*’, which happens when people – teachers, in our case – misread the social norm and suppress their own views, which further widens the divide, and may create an atmosphere in which the majority of teachers keep silent because they fear they are in a minority. I have seen this in action in many instances.

English certainly is the second language of most of Europe. But it doesn't work to 'the greater good of Global Britain'. It means that disparate people from several countries can communicate easily. A good example is the following, from an encounter in Paris: A British man talking in English and planning on setting up a brewery in Estonia got into conversation with some people involved in breweries, from Estonia, Italy, and France. They weren't interested in going to the U.K. to check out breweries or pubs. This type of interaction is taking place all over the EU, and the world: English definitely now 'belongs to everyone'.

Parents are naturally keen for their children to become fluent in English. It is the globalized world's lingua franca, and fluency is considered to offer considerable benefits. Indeed, it is safe to say many opportunities and career paths will not be available to someone without a fluent knowledge of English. However, it is important that parents understand that their children are unlikely to acquire an impeccable native accent, especially if they commence learning the language after puberty. Some examples will illustrate how far false expectations can lead, and the views that adults can hold of the importance of having a native accent. Stephen Krashen recounted (at the ECIS ESL and MT conference, Geneva, in 2008) how in South Korea many parents believed that their ethnic background included having a physical characteristic that precluded them from speaking English 'native-like'. They therefore took their children for an operation that involved cutting away certain tissues around the tongue. Unfortunately no perceivable benefit was reported.

The argument that being taught English by a native speaker is the only way to be sure of gaining a native-like accent has many flaws, not the least of which is that SL speakers of English far outnumber native speakers, so SL learners are far more likely to spend their lives conversing with other SL speakers than with native speakers. A thorough investigation of this issue is made by Cook (2014), who states (p. 134), 'If you ask L2 learners what they want to become in a second language, the answer is . . . : they want to be native speakers.' However, he points out that 'A native speaker is usually said to be "a person who has spoken a certain language since early childhood."' He adds, 'Most people seem to believe that the only person who speaks a language properly is a native speaker. But, if the definition above is correct, no L2 user could ever become a native speaker: it's far too late. The only ones to make the grade would be children brought up from the very beginning in two languages' (ibid. 135). The result can be that 'Consequently most L2 users consider themselves failures for not sounding like native speakers, something they could never be – by definition' (ibid.). In a summary of a thorough analysis of the matter, Cook comments, 'Many L2 learners and L2 users aspire to be as similar as possible to a native speaker. Yet it is hard to pin down what an ideal native speaker

might be. This native speaker goal cannot be achieved because they already have one language in their minds. L2 users and L2 learners need to be assessed against successful L2 users, not against native speakers as reflected in many contemporary examination systems' (ibid.: 139). This has deep-reaching implications for testing and grading.

Elerian gives examples of bullying of SL students, but this can also extend to similar treatment of staff, by colleagues, as reported to me by two NNESTs – Non-native English-speaking teachers: In an international school, ESL teachers who themselves were speakers of English as a second language were intimidated by other staff, suggestions being made that they could not perform their job properly. In another IS, a fluent NNEST told me how the majority British teachers basically ignored him, and at best treated him as a second-class citizen. Such stories are too many to recount here.

In fact, ESL teachers who have learned English as a second language often have greater insights and empathy in teaching SLLs – second language learners - than mother-tongue English teachers. They have been through the same process themselves, and now belong to the majority of speakers of English worldwide, those who speak it as a second language. They are also reported as speaking more clearly. As Shin surmises, '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.' (Shin, 2008: 57)

Cherng and Halpin carried out research on students' perceptions of minority versus white teachers in the USA. They found that students perceived minority teachers more favourably than white teachers, and concluded that their findings underscored the importance of minority teacher recruitment and retention. They point out that '[a]n overwhelmingly White teaching force is working with a majority non-White student population' (Cherng and Halpin, 2016: 407), that minority teachers 'are more multiculturally aware than their White peers and that higher levels of multicultural awareness are linked to better classroom environments' (ibid.: 416). They add: 'It also may be the case that minority teachers are particularly well perceived by minority students because minority teachers may have personal experience navigating racial stereotypes about academic achievement and can equip students to combat these stereotypes. And this rapport, built on positive student perceptions of teachers, might contribute to academic success for students.' (ibid.)

They conclude that their findings attest to the importance of having a diverse teaching staff: research has shown that students' perceptions of teachers are associated with motivation and achievement. Ultimately, they suggest, minority teachers are often able to form strong ties with students, and can thus help to empower youth of all backgrounds.

At the annual international IATEFL conference in Birmingham in April 2016, Silvana Richardson, the head of teacher development at the Bell Foundation, gave a plenary devoted entirely to the issue of NNESTs. As she writes in one of her opening slides:

'What quality am I emphasizing by saying that I am a NON-Native English-Speaking Teacher? How is asserting what we are by negating what we are not a meaningful and constructive way of referring to ourselves?

Why do we still refer to an aspect of the professional identity of over 80% of the teachers of English in the world as a 'NON'?

How is it possible that it is still a legitimate term in our professional discourse in 2016?'

(<https://iatefl.britishcouncil.org/2016/session/plenary-silvana-richardson>)

In the slides and in her talk she goes into depth to respond to these questions, with the clear message that: 'As a profession, we need to move beyond the unhelpful and pernicious dichotomy, and conceptually stop separating professionals into different camps. In many cases, this absolute division is artificial, given the global mobility of many ELT professionals, and how some of us live in other countries for long periods of time.' (ibid.)

International schools are ideally placed to recruit local professional ESL teachers who are well qualified for the job. School heads and boards need to take a long, hard look at their recruiting, advertising, and staffing policies, and make decisions based on good educational practice, not simply marketing and profits.

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