Can a Non-native Speaking Teacher Become a Good English Teacher in an EFL Setting?

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I argue in the present paper that non-native speaker (NNS) teachers have more advantages than native speaker (NS) teachers do in an EFL context. NNS teachers have a better understanding of students' language learning problems, and they know best the typical learning style, strategies, needs, and contexts of use of second language students. In addition, they can compensate the shortcomings of being non-native by utilizing tools such as technology to replicate native speaker use in the classroom. Consequently, they can facilitate students' language learning in ways that suit their interests. Nonetheless, in order to incorporate NS teachers' strengths in an EFL setting, NNS teachers can form teams or task forces with NS counterparts. NS teachers could become instructors for groups of NNS teachers during periods of in service and out of service training and serve as consultants for them on a daily basis on the job. I suggest along with Samimy and Brutt Griffler (1999) that the government invest more money in educating NNS teachers within an EFL setting rather than bringing in less qualified NS teachers from other countries.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is true that we live in a constantly changing world, and English use is expanding rapidly. In consequence of the global expansion of English, there are more people who speak English as a second language than as a mother tongue. English is no longer exclusively owned by native-speaking communities (Llurda, 2004). Because a majority of English speakers can be considered non-natives, there are many changes in teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Therefore, a proportionate number of English language teachers who are not native speakers in EFL settings will be teaching English in the world (Braine, 1999).

The reasons for using English in each country are unique, and each country has
different first language backgrounds and a different status of English. Who are the best teachers in an EFL setting? Would they be non-native speaking (NNS) teachers or native-speaking (NS) teachers? Are NS teachers always the best in an EFL context? Do NNS teachers have advantages in teaching a second language in an EFL setting compared to NS teachers? Can a NNS teacher be a good English teacher in an EFL situation?

These issues have intrigued me ever since I started teaching English as a foreign language to middle school students in Korea. Phillipson (1992) reports that one of the key tenets in the 1961 Makarere Conference in Uganda was that the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker (as cited in Braine, 1999, p. xiv). Contra the tenet, I argue in the present paper that NNS teachers have more advantages in teaching a second language in an EFL setting than NS teachers.

II. THE EDUCATIONAL SITUATION OF KOREA

When I started my career as an EFL teacher in late 1980s, it was quite a rare opportunity to meet native speakers of English in the public schools. However, the policy of foreign language teaching suddenly changed in 1997. There was a new emphasis on using only English when teaching an English class. In addition, instead of starting English teaching in seventh grade, English teaching would now begin in third grade. The new policy written by the Ministry of Education of Korea includes standards that help develop students’ communicative competence, exploring capacity, and problem solving abilities, and they emphasize incorporating students’ everyday life in the English teaching scene. These new standards reflect the importance and focus of English in Korea. Because the majority of English teachers and elementary school teachers were not ready to teach English in accordance with the new standard, teachers’ language proficiency became an issue to the teachers and the people in the Ministry of Education of Korea.

Because most teachers were not proficient speakers of English, they were not able to conduct English classes depending exclusively on the target language. According to Braine (1999), since ESL educational administrators were frustrated with incompetent non-proficient NNS teachers in their own countries, they came to conclude that NS teachers could be more efficient. In addition, he points out that in some Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, prejudice and discrimination
toward the idealization of NS teachers are spreading rapidly. In these countries, being a NS teacher is often the main qualification to teach English. People in the Ministry of Education of Korea reached the same conclusion. They gradually began to arrange for NS teachers to come to a district educational office and the government replaced some NNS teachers with NS teachers. They insisted that NS teachers were most able to improve students’ communicative competency in an EFL setting. However, elementary school and secondary school teachers were conscious of their lack of mastery in English. In order to regain their self-respect as an EFL teacher, most of teachers struggled to overcome the lack of English language proficiency. They enrolled in private English language schools, took private lessons, and went abroad to study English. Unfortunately, some teachers who were not good at English and could not improve their proficiency ended up with quitting their teaching positions.

I doubt that NS teachers are better than NNS teachers in EFL settings, because of several experiences I had during my fifteen plus year teaching job. One NS teacher provided an example of a serious disadvantage in an EFL setting in my class. I worked together with a NS teacher from Australia who was employed for several months by the government. At the beginning of the semester, my students gazed with deep interest and enthusiasm on this Australian because of his nationality. Soon, however, they did not pay attention to him anymore. Instead, my students complained about his attitude in class. He did not understand the Korean classroom environment, the Korean educational system, and students’ affective factors. In the end it turned out that he had not been a successful teacher for my students. According to Lee (2000), a good English teacher based on students’ perceptions is a person who has the quality of help which students get from the teacher such as knowledge and training teaching techniques, and has a good relationship with their students based on the teacher’s personality.

As in the case of the Australian teacher, NS teachers are often not well-qualified, because they are hired simply due to their nationalities. Braine (1999) points out that in many countries the main qualification to teach English is simply being a NS teacher of English. Because of this, many inexperienced exchange students become English tutors simply because of their NS status (p. 26). Based on his experience as a NNS teacher in Turkey, Braine (1999) concludes that NNS teachers have a better understanding of students’ language learning problems which can be an advantage for a second language teacher.

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III. THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF NNS OR NS TEACHERS

Compared to first language acquisition which is the process of 'picking up' a language through exposure, second language acquisition might be the conscious process of studying a target language (Ellis, 1994, p.14). Edge (1998) defines a native speaker of language as a person who learns the language as a mother tongue. He also states that in a foreign country where a language does not play an established social role, a native speaker model is needed, but what students have to learn may deviate from a native-speaking model. Thus, the role of NNS teachers who share the students' mother tongue is crucial in an EFL setting. Because Edge (1988) had experienced as a NS speaker of English in Turkey, he asserts that the ideal model of Turkish schoolchildren is a Turkish teacher, who can act as a model for them in social, cultural, emotional, or experiential terms, with regard either to their past or their future (p. 155).

In addition, according to Tarnopolsky (2000), many researchers see no differences between teaching ESL and EFL. These people believe that data for second language acquisition are completely relevant to foreign language teaching. Other researchers draw a distinction between learning English in an ESL setting and an EFL setting. When organizing EFL teaching as compared to ESL teaching, two things need to be considered. One is to focus on language form and formal grammar instruction activities without encroaching on the fundamental principles of the communicative approach: teaching language for communication, in communication, and through communication. The other is to develop the communicative behavioral patterns of the target culture and compare them to those of the home culture.

In an EFL setting, it seems to be very difficult to avoid using the first language to achieve these goals, and opportunities to use the second language are very limited. Schmidt (1995) asserts that using the first language (L1) in the classroom provides a natural bridge for teachers and students to overcome problems of vocabulary, sentence structure, and student confidence in classes with mixed ability levels or less advanced students. In addition, L1 use can save time and have a positive effect on the teacher student relationship. Rivera (1999) states that the native language of the students bridges their past and future, and the students' native language can be used not only as an aid to learning English but also as to access background knowledge (p. 485). Cook (2001) argues that L1 can be a useful
tool for teachers to convey meaning, explain grammar, and organize the class, and for students to use as part of their collaborative learning and individual strategy use.

However, NNS teachers always do not have advantages in using the L1 in the second language classroom. Medgyes (1992) asserts that the native speakers' linguistic competence is so substantial that it cannot be outweighed by any other teaching-learning considerations (p. 342). He considers the NNS teachers as permanent learners under a linguistic handicap such as theoretical or colloquial variability in their usage of the language, but he points out that NS teacher also may not be proficient L1 users. Medgyes (1992) does not conclude that NS teachers are necessarily more effective English language teachers and NNS teachers have an equal chance of success, because they show empathy, provide a good model for imitation, and teach effective language learning strategies for second language learners.

As the above discussion reveals, NNS teachers have advantages and disadvantages in teaching a second language (L2) in an EFL setting. Reves and Medgyes (1994) investigates how NNS teachers' command of English effects their self-image and, in turn, influences the way they teach. They concludes that the essential factors in teaching a L2 are NNS teachers' teaching qualifications, the time NNS teachers spend in an English-speaking country and the frequency of NNS teachers' contact with native speakers of English.

Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999) describe the differences between NS and NNS teachers as follows: NS teachers are informal, fluent, accurate, flexible, and more successful because of their use of authentic English: NNS teachers are more efficient, sensitive to the needs of students, and they can apply their knowledge of the differences between L1 and L2 and know students' background. Furthermore, they point out that NNS teachers rely on textbooks and materials. In conclusion, the authors state that NS teachers are more successful because of their use of authentic English: whereas, NNS teachers also have advantages of sensitivity to the students' needs and greater efficiency. However, Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999) do not think that NS teachers are superior to NNS teachers, because numerous factors such as the goals and objectives of the program, and the age and level of students affect second language learning more than individual teachers' personalities and skills.

According to Braine (1999), NS teachers have a fluent command of the language, correct language forms, and the knowledge of the cultural connotation of a language, but NS teachers may not be fully aware of cultural language usage.

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However, Braine (1999, p. xiv) insists that NNS teachers can reach insights into the language learning process, the correct form and appropriate use of language, and the ability to analyze and explain the language. In addition, they know the process of learning a language and can use other equipment like technology to replicate native speakers in the classroom.

Kramsch (1997) doubts the idealization of the NS teachers for foreign language study. Kramsch points out that some NS speakers may not speak English in standardized and idealized ways because their speech is influenced by geography, occupation, age and the social status of the speakers. That's why students of foreign language do not have to emulate the idealized monolingual native speakers. She concludes that what makes one a native speaker is not grammatical intuition, linguistic acceptability and fluent competence. According to Kramsch (1997), native speakership is neither a privilege of birth nor of education.

Tarnopolsky (2000) researched the disadvantages and advantages of NNS teachers over NS teachers in an EFL situation. NNS teachers have four primary disadvantages even though they are highly qualified and competent: a foreign accent and serious imperfections in English language use, the unawareness of the recent developments in English because of the characteristics of living languages, the lack of cultural awareness of the target language cultural communities such as non-verbal and lifestyle communicative behavioral patterns, and limited availability of the latest and most advanced English teaching materials and methods developed in English-speaking countries.

Tarnopolsky (2000, p. 35) concludes that "the majority of English language teachers who are not native speakers (TENNS [NNS])" in EFL situations have the following five advantages over "teachers of English who are native speakers of this language (TENS [NS])." When these NNS teachers share their mother tongue and home culture, NNS teachers can facilitate and accelerate the process of learning English by sharing their students' mother tongue. NNS teachers can equip students with solving some learning problems effectively by providing a clear idea about the differences between L1 and L2. NNS teachers can develop students' interlingual awareness, which is an important prerequisite for learning the target language efficiently. NNS teachers can help students' intercultural awareness and especially non-verbal and life style communicative behavioral patterns. NNS teachers can provide a more achievable model of qualified and competent teachers.
Widdowson (1994) states that NS teachers acquire the language and culture as an integrated experience, and NS teachers can be considered as the arbiters of authentic classroom materials. Widdowson defines authentic use as having to do with the uses and structures of English in traditional native speaker communities. Thus, NNS teachers grant privileged status to NS teachers, not only with respect to competence in the language but also in respect to competence in language teaching. Widdowson (1994) also states that when the emphasis is moved from the contexts of use to contexts of learning, there is little advantage that NS teachers have. A NS teacher is better aware of the appropriate contexts of language use, not the contexts of language learning (p. 387). However, autonomy of learning would privilege the expertise of periphery teachers. They know best the typical learning style, strategies, needs, and contexts of use of second language students and can thus facilitate their language acquisition in ways that suit their interests.

Lee (2000) supports that NNS teachers have advantages over NS teachers because NNS teachers, who have learned English as a foreign language, understand the needs of students and support their students based on their previous experiences by sharing them with their students. Because of this, NNS teachers can be good role models for EFL students. Lee (2000) concludes convincingly that what makes good English teachers does not depend on nationality or accent but on NNS teachers' personalities and professionalism.

Finally, Llurda (2004, p. 318) examines the positive role of NNS teachers in English as an international language. They are best suited to incorporate instructional materials and activities in local and international contexts, and they are inherently endowed with better expertise in guiding this process. Compared to NS teachers who are monolingual speakers of English, NNS teachers are responsible for presenting the multifaceted reality in which the new language is used and for helping the learners to express their own identities (p. 320). If so, English lessons in EFL contexts provided with NNS teachers are more effective than those of NS teachers, because NNS teachers have the capacity to move freely from the L1 to the L2 (Llurda, 2004, p. 317).

IV. SUGGESTIONS TO SOLVE THESE PROBLEMS

Although NNS teachers have many advantages in teaching a second language in an EFL setting compared to NS teachers, some people worried about the natural
disadvantages of NNS teachers such as the imperfections in English language use, the unawareness of the recent developments in English, and the lack of cultural awareness. In order to eliminate these NNS teachers’ disadvantages, educational administrators have to search for reasonable solutions.

There are two feasible solutions, according to Tarnopolsky (2000), which can abolish NNS teachers’ natural disadvantages and increase their advantages (p. 38). Tarnopolsky (2000) suggests that in non-English-speaking countries, NS teachers shift to teaching NNS teachers and that the NNS teacher in-service training via the internet be increased by elaborating worldwide networks. That is to say, the first one is a re-orientation of many NS teachers working in non-English-speaking countries that teach EFL. Every NS teacher could become an instructor for groups of NNS teachers during their periods of in-service or out-of-service training and a consultant for many more of them in their practical every day job. The second solution is elaborating the world wide networks of continuous NNS teacher in-service training via the internet by concentrating on latest developments in the English language itself, cultural issues such as verbal, non-verbal and lifestyle patterns, the latest and most advanced developments in English language teaching (ELT), and the latest and most advanced teaching materials for ELT.

These advantages should be balanced against the list of disadvantages. If English is taught by NNS teachers as a foreign language, these advantages should be considered and used effectively in the teaching environments. How to remove the disadvantages mentioned above should also be considered. Tarnopolsky (2000) suggests several things in order to eliminate the natural disadvantages of NNS teachers and mentioned several ways to increase their advantages even more. When students present difficulties of specific L2 problems, using the students’ mother tongue gives opportunities to solve these problems by making relevant comparisons and developing appropriate methodology and materials with the mother tongue. Tarnopolsky (2000) proposes that the best solution is forming teams or task-forces consisting of EFL researchers and developers of teaching materials. Effective ways to change and to integrate form-focused instruction in communication frameworks are ‘partner teaching’ or ‘team teaching.’ ‘Partner teaching’ would consist of, for example, forty-five minutes teaching by NNS teachers and another forty-five minutes teaching by NS teachers of the same material. ‘Team teaching’ would be considered as teamwork between a NS teacher.
and a NNS teacher working side-by-side in the same classroom.

One of the strongest advantages of collaborative teaching is the ability of the team to model interaction. A good relationship between the team teachers can help students to be exposed to authentic conversation or negotiation of meaning. Costa (1993) explored the relationship between teacher participation in a teacher collaboration program and teaching-learning outcomes. Based on the result of this experiment, Costa concludes that when teachers use collaborative consultation, there are positive outcomes for both teachers and students. The disadvantage of imperfections in English of a NNS teacher will disappear if appropriate efforts are made. Also, Edge (1988, p. 156) suggests that partnership with the NS teachers supports the NNS teachers attempt to model communication with a foreigner. NNS teachers need as much help as NS teachers when using English to interact internationally. Medgyes (1994) suggests that the solution of these differences is collaboration between NS and NNS teachers. Based on their result of the paper, Reves and Medgyes (1994) suggest two things. One is that the linguistic deficits on the part of the NNS teachers have to be openly acknowledged and legitimized. The other difference is that NNS teachers need to work on their command of English to minimize their deficiencies so as to approximate the proficiency, as much as possible, to that of the NS teachers (p. 364). Kamhi-Stein (1999) suggests, moreover, NS and NNS teachers engage in a more meaningful dialogue, collaborative projects such as giving conference presentations, and they develop and design classroom materials and classroom activities based on the partnership as equal partners, and sharing their unique perspectives and learning from one another.

V. CONCLUSION

As I mentioned above, I conclude firmly that NNS teachers have many advantages in teaching English in an EFL setting. Because NNS teachers have learned English as a foreign language, they understand the needs and experiences of their students. In order to be good English teachers, they have probably spent much time and effort to master the language. Thus, NNS teachers can explain how they learned grammar, how they attempted to expand their vocabulary, and how they overcame the problems they faced during learning English (Lee, 2000). NNS teachers who share the monolingual students’ mother tongue and culture can facilitate, accelerate, and improve
the learning process. Also, NNS teachers can provide insightful cross-cultural comparisons for their learners which can be another potential source of increased awareness of why the students need the language. NNS teachers are aware of the challenges in learning a new language and can address these difficulties better than NS teachers creating a natural bridge for overcoming problems of vocabulary, sentences structures and student confidence. Finally, NNS teachers share the students' mother tongue and home cultures so that students are led to become better equipped in interlingual and intercultural aware. NNS teachers can escape from the essentially nationalistic world-view of non-native speaker or native speaker. We need to listen to Saminoy and Brutt-Griffler (1999) when they insist that the government should invest more money in educating NNS teachers in their countries rather than bringing in NS teachers from other countries. What the Korean government is doing offers only a short-term solution. English teachers should be homegrown (p. 138).

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