# Native Versus Non-Native Speaker: Professionalism over inheritance

*Peter Hubbard, Universidad de Guadalajara* [1]

## Introduction

It is a fact that the vast majority of English teachers in the world are not native speakers. There are no official statistics that I am aware of to support this statement, but anybody with experience in the field of English teaching would probably accept a conservative estimate of about 80% non-native speakers in the entire worldwide population. If this is true, there are certain inescapable implications which might provide food for considerable thought in our profession. In particular, educators of future non-native speakers of English have to rethink traditional approaches to teacher education, which have mostly been controlled by native speakers. We also have to think about the purposes of English teaching and about the varieties of English we are teaching. If English is truly an international language, then it no longer **belongs** to native speakers of Great Britain or the United States, Canada or Australia. By the same token, native speakers of English are not automatically entitled to exclusive rights in the question of **how** their language should be taught. We should regard the world dominance of schools of applied linguistics or TESOL in native speaking countries as a mere historical accident rather than a logical necessity. We should be looking out for a considerable amount of initiative on the part of non-native speakers in non-native speaking countries to establish innovative approaches to both the teaching of English and the education of English teachers.

It is also a fact that in most countries in the world native-speaking English teachers (NEST's) enjoy an elevated status over their non-native speaking colleagues (non-NEST's) that is at times difficult to accept.

The issues that we have to consider in this paper are therefore at the same time linguistic, professional and, to some extent, political.

Specifically, the questions that we have to discuss are the following:

1. Are there any differences between native and non-native speaking teachers of English? If so, what do such differences amount to in practical terms in the average English language classroom?

[1] This paper is a version of the plenary presented by the author at the National MEXTESOL Convention, Puerto Vallarta, 1993. The author can be reached at the Escuela Superior de Lenguas Modernas, Universidad de Guadalajara, Apartado Postal 2-416, Guadalajara, Jalisco 44280, Mexico.

2. How do such differences affect the English teaching profession? Specifically, what effect do they have on the English teaching scene in Mexico?
3. What is the English teaching profession in Mexico? Can English teaching be a profession, in the accepted sense? What are the limits of professionalism in the English teaching community in Mexico and what are the implications of this for teachers of English and schools of English in Mexico?

**Native and Non-Native Speakers: What are the differences?**

The first point here is that there are differences between native and non-native speakers and it would be extremely misguided to think along the lines that they can be regarded as the same. This is not, of course, to say that one can automatically be regarded as superior to the other.

However, before comparing the two, there remains the question of who is or is not a native speaker. In other words, what does *native speaker* mean? The answer to the question is not as obvious as it might seem. This issue was exhaustively discussed by Rampton (1990), who pointed out that the main ideas behind the concept *native speaker* are the following:

***The Myth of the Native Speaker***

1. *A particular language is inherited, either through genetic endowment or through birth into the social group stereotypically associated with it.*
2. *Inheriting a language means being able to speak it well.*
3. *People either are or are not native/mother-tongue speakers.*
4. *Being a native speaker involves the comprehensive grasp of a language.*
5. *Just as people are usually citizens of one country, people are native speakers of one mother tongue.*

Rampton follows this up with the observation that each of these concepts is now contested. Inheriting a language is not genetic and it is a question of chance which social group *native speakers* are born into. Many native speakers do not in fact have a total mastery of a language. For example, many cannot write it or tell stories in it, whereas many *non-native speakers* can. In any language group, users' functional proficiency varies according to their occupation, social class and education. No native speaker's command is total. It is false to assume that each person has just one native language: there are very few countries in the world that have just one language. Assertions 3 and 4 are therefore invalid. Assertion 3, that people either are or are not native speakers is perhaps the key issue. It is either false or irrelevant in the case of language teaching, depending on one's interpretation of the term.

Rampton further points out that there are political interests at stake. It is convenient for certain governments that English be automatically identified with either the United States or the United Kingdom.

He also observes that there is a fallacy involved in automatically equating a certain language as **an instrument of communication** with the same language as **a symbol of social identification**.

If we accept these arguments, at least in part, we are left with a greatly diminished certainty that we understand the concept *native speaker* as a monolithic entity; that we are more doubtful of a clear division between native and non-native speakers; and that we feel distinctly uncomfortable about the use of the term in general.

Rampton finishes his article by distinguishing between different aspects of language user's relationship with the language: inheritance, expertise and affiliation. Whereas inheritance is a product of mere chance, expertise is learned and can be related to proficiency for specific purposes of communication and so on. Affiliation, on the other hand, is a matter of loyalty or allegiance to a language. Inheritance and affiliation together contrast strongly with language expertise. The latter is learned, not acquired; it is relative rather than absolute; it is defined by **areas** of use; and it can be tested and certified. He also points out that inheritance and affiliation are not in fact absolute and indisputable qualities, but the subject of negotiation by both governments and individuals. In short, Rampton concludes that language expertise should be one of the criteria by which we judge teachers' proficiency, whereas inheritance or affiliation should not.

The main differences can be summarised as follows:

| | Inheritance / Affiliation | Expertise |
|---|---|---|
| Can be learned? | No. | Yes. |
| Can be tested? | No. | Yes. |
| Is absolute? | Said to be absolute, but in reality is negotiable. | Relative to background. |

**Figure 1. The Main Differences between Expertise and Other Aspects of Native-Speakerness**

**How does the distinction between NEST's and non-NEST's affect the English teaching profession? What effects can we observe in Mexico?**

Is it true that this distinction has an effect on English teaching in Mexico? Yes. There is a strong bias in favour of employing or being taught by NEST's. This is becoming a serious problem now that there are a greater number of professional degree courses to prepare Mexicans to be teachers of English. These young professionals are putting themselves in the job market, only to find that they are displaced by **unqualified** native speakers. The "hippie system" has been operating all over the world for some time and employers are unwilling to change their habits, even if the government is putting more and more pressure on them to take out official work permits for all foreigners.

Peter Medgyes (1983, 1986, 1992), who is himself a non-NEST, has dedicated a considerable amount of time to investigation of this issue. One survey he conducted in Britain and France indicates that the bias is a real one. The questions he asked were the following:

***Medgyes' Survey on Employer Bias***

*Suppose you were the principal of a commercial ELT school in Britain. Who would you employ?*

*A) I would employ only native speakers, even if they were not qualified EFL teachers.*
*B) I would prefer to employ native-speaking EFL teachers, but if hard pressed I would choose a qualified non-native rather than a native without EFL qualifications.*
*C) The native/non-native issue would not be a selection criterion (provided the non-native speaking EFL teacher were a highly proficient speaker of English).* (Medgyes 1992)

When he conducted the survey during a conference in Britain, approximately two thirds voted for **(B)** while one third opted for **(C)**. Nobody voted for **(A)**. Medgyes took this to indicate that for all potential employers of ELT teachers professionalism was important: Hence, **(A)** was not selected. However, the majority followed both market and professional criteria in making their decision; whereas a minority were more self-conscientiously "correct" in observing no bias between native and non-native speakers.

On a later occasion, Medgyes conducted the same survey on a group of ELT specialists at a conference in Paris. The majority of this group were non-native speakers of English. In this survey, two thirds of them voted for **(C)**, one third for **(B)** and again nobody voted for **(A)**. He then rephrased the question as **"Suppose you were the principal of a commercial ELT school in France..."** This time, an even greater majority chose option **(C)**.

The implications of Medgyes' surveys can be summarised as follows:

*Implication of Medgyes' Surveys*

1. Potential employers of English as a foreign language teachers recognise the importance of professional training.
2. However, they are also aware of market forces and the fact that students prefer to have a native speaker as a teacher. Their decision between a NEST and a non-NEST would therefore be based on the balance between these two forces.
3. Non-native speaking employers of English teachers have less bias against non-NEST's than their native colleagues. They have even less of an objection to employing non-NEST's if they are working in a non-English speaking country.

(Based on Medgyes 1992)

Why should there be less objection to employing non-NEST's in a non-native speaking country? Is this a question of acceptability or social justice in following fair employment practices? As Medgyes points out, there are complex dynamic forces at work. He suggests the following: market, professional, linguistic, moral, political, and others.

How do these forces work out in Mexico? It is perhaps still too early to say. We have now passed the time when English teaching was a predominately amateur occupation. More and more teachers are being trained to various degrees of professional acceptability. There are now signs that *Gobernación* is stepping in with more rigid insistence on work permits for foreigners; and work permits require solid paper qualifications. This does not, of course, entirely solve the problem, which remains one of prejudice--a matter of attitude rather than of law. Mexico is noted for its *malinchismo*. Is this the cause in this case? Or do Mexican learners feel that a perfect language model is essential? Or is it simply that many learners here have had traumatic experiences in secondary school at the hands of Mexican teachers of English? It will take time for the new Mexican professionals to be accepted by their students as such. But there are indications that this is happening. However, unqualified NEST's still abound,

mostly teaching advanced classes in their amateur fashion with greater or lesser degrees of success.

**What are the Real Differences between NEST's and Non-NEST's?**

In yet a further survey among about 220 teachers working in 10 countries, Medgyes (1992) demonstrated that a convincing majority of respondents accepted that there were real differences in the way in which NEST's and non-NEST's conducted their classes. If this difference is real and not just perceived, further research would be necessary to find out exactly what these differences are. This would not be easy to conduct. However, what seems to be indisputable is that the NEST can always claim to be more proficient than a non-NEST in terms of most aspects of linguistic knowledge. This difference in linguistic competence has an inevitable effect on teaching style. Be this as it may, Medgyes does go on to suggest some important differences in role and capacity between non-NEST's and NEST's. Stating the case from the side of the non-NEST, we could affirm:

*What Non-NEST's can do.*

Non-NEST's can:

1. serve as imitable models of the successful language learner of English.
2. teach learning strategies more effectively.
3. provide learners with more information about the English language from the learners' point of view.
4. anticipate language difficulties better.
5. be more empathetic to the needs and problems of their learners.
6. communicate better with their learners.

(Based on Medgyes 1992)

On points 1 and 6, Medgyes may be underestimating those native speakers of English who have mastered their students' language to a high degree of proficiency. Perhaps yet further research is needed to find out what the differences are between NEST's who have a good mastery of the students' mother tongue and those who do not. Clearly, this is not a simple area for a researcher to work in, since there exists a fair measure of prejudice and resentment in the various parties involved and the dynamics of forces at work is a difficult one.

Medgyes has also pointed out (Medgyes 1986) that the current emphasis on communicative teaching favours the NEST and places a heavy burden on his non-NEST colleague. This could cause a disenchantment with the communicative approach

among non-NEST's and increase their resentment toward NEST's, especially since the communicative approach has been imported by NEST's themselves.

And what of the NEST? Her or his advantages might be:

*The Strengths of the NEST*

The NEST can:

1. serve as a perfect linguistic model for the learner.
2. be highly effective in promoting fluency.
3. give students essential cultural knowledge.

These assertions are speculative rather than research-based. However, they are probably not far from the truth.

A short comment on each of these qualities is needed.

The assertion that NEST's can serve as perfect linguistic models for students should be qualified by the obvious, but disconcerting, fact that nobody speaks "standard" English and therefore there may be a serious mismatch between the kind of model students need and the native speaker they get. For example, if your students have most interest in learning American English, a British teacher might cause them some problems. Since native speakers often appear by chance rather than by design, the argument that they make better language models may be weakened by the fortuitous nature of their language background. In particular, we may wish to modify the word "perfect" in the above assertion.

The argument that native speakers are better for students who need to acquire fluency is a strong one as long as a teacher-centered classroom is under consideration. However, many fluency approaches nowadays make extensive use of group and pair work. The teachers' own fluency becomes less important under these conditions. It is worth pointing out also that if fluency is to be taught under strongly teacher-fronted conditions, students are likely to lack sufficient opportunity for practice to acquire any reasonable degree of fluency. This argument is therefore flawed. It is certainly true that a teacher who lacks fluency cannot be a good fluency teacher, but this is not the argument under consideration. We are comparing the linguistically and methodologically competent non-NEST to any NEST, qualified or not.

It has been convincingly argued that learning a language includes the acquisition of at least two different kinds of knowledge: **systemic** knowledge, which involves knowledge of the internal language system; and **schematic** knowledge, which is knowledge of the world of the target language user. The idea is, then, that only the native speaker has sufficient knowledge of the language user's world to provide students with the richness of cultural detail they will require to learn the language adequately. This argument might work well for learners whose motivation is strongly integrative, who wish to become thoroughly immersed in the target culture. But it is not so strong for those--arguably, the majority--whose motivation is instrumental and geared more towards learning English for one or several specific purposes. In any case, if the hypothetical non-NEST under comparison with a native colleague is really linguistically competent, then she or he must have more than enough knowledge of the target culture to satisfy students' needs. We are reduced therefore to quibbling about a NEST's ability to interpret subtle nuances of the language. This, I would suggest, is a luxury that most students can do without. Moreover, it is sadly true that many amateur native speakers on the ESL teaching circuit are unable themselves to master these subtle nuances or explain them satisfactorily to students. I would therefore question the assumption that all NEST's have perfect knowledge of the target culture: They have a knowledge that corresponds to their background experience, whatever that happens to be.

As we can see there are important differences between the NEST and non-NEST--especially with respect to the role the teacher can play effectively. But it is not a situation that automatically casts the non-NEST in an inferior role. On the contrary, the non-NEST enjoys certain strong advantages over his NEST colleague, setting aside mere prejudice.

**Professionalism and the Non-Nest**

If an employer is forced to make a choice between a professional non-NEST and an amateur NEST, who will she or he choose? This seems to be a crucial question.

I have been arguing that the preference for NEST's is largely based on student prejudice, which school directors take strongly into account in making their choice of employees. My arguments are aimed to redress the balance in favour of employing non-NEST's and displacing amateur NEST's in Mexico. I have been maintaining that,although the differences between NEST's and non-NEST's are real ones, they do not amount to much in terms of teaching or learning advantages. By implication, I have been arguing for a greater emphasis on professionalism in Mexico.

This, however, raises the question: What is professionalism? This is another controversial area and it would be impossible to go over all the arguments here. Neverthe-

less, it is worthwhile taking a look at two examples of commentary on the subject from opposing points of view.

Alan Maley (1992) has argued that the ELT "profession" is not a profession in the accepted sense of the word, but that it is moving towards that position. This process of professionalization is steady, but sure. He maintains that the "profession" as it stands is enormously diverse and impossible to subject to rigid standards. He further maintains that this diversity is also an advantage, because it admits new ideas and encourages growth. However, he admits that English teachers are not accepted as professionals in the same sense that lawyers and doctors are. This could be a disadvantage for practitioners.

A comment on Maley's position is required. Two obvious reinforcers of professional respectability are: paper or university qualifications; and the prestige that society confers on practitioners. These two determining factors are very different. University qualifications carry weight, but only up to a certain point. Both in developed and developing countries, the public at large are wary of charlatans in any profession. University qualifications are considered necessary if a practitioner is to be taken seriously, but the public also demand a demonstration of results. A professional's reputation cannot rely solely on paper qualifications: it also needs to be backed up by publicly accepted success in practice in the field.

Another factor that can reinforce professional status is the existence of professional bodies that officially accredit a practitioner who has been admitted. These bodies can also discredit someone who has been found guilty of unethical or unprofessional conduct. Although English language teaching has certain professional associations, these do not assume the role of professional accreditation. They are simply support organizations.

For some reason or other, it is the case that teachers are not normally accepted as professionals. There are several reasons for this. One is that they are popularly considered to be the passers-on of already established knowledge. It is thought that such an occupation is a low level, technical one. There are, however, other reasons. Normally, professionals are accepted as authorities in their fields. That is to say each professional can make a decision based on their professional judgement and this decision is final. Clients may, if they wish, seek the advice of other professionals, but the decision of any professional consulted is considered to be authoritative.

Let us consider an example in the field of medicine. Suppose that a person who suffers from pain in the back goes to a doctor and seeks her/his professional opinion. The doctor, after examining the patient, may do a number of things. S/he may immedi-

ately diagnose the problem and recommend a cure. Alternatively, s/he may decide to send the patient to a specialist in back problems for a more detailed analysis.

What is happening here is that the professional gives her/his judgement. This may include the recommendation for further, more specialized analysis and attention by another professional. In either case, the professional judgement of the doctor is not called into question. The doctor does not consult with another doctor. If, by any chance, the patient does not trust the professional opinion of the doctor, s/he may decide to consult another professional. This is always a possibility.

The situation of the teacher is not so clearly defined. Teachers, however well qualified they may be, are almost always under supervision. Although they may have sole authority over the groups of students in their classes, they are always subject to the rules and regulations of the school in which they work and their decisions may be called into question by their supervisors. In short, teachers are always aware of the supervisor looking over their shoulders; they do not really feel that they have the authority of a normal professional.

It is also the case that many teachers lack solid paper qualifications. This is especially true in the case of language teaching. Since they are in a relatively weak position regarding their paper qualifications, they tend to accept a less than dignified status and low pay, with little possibility of criticizing the working conditions in their school.

Should we then argue in favour of a policy that obliges all teachers of English to have professional qualifications? And if this were both desirable and possible in Mexico, how could we ensure that teachers receive the pay and status that they are entitled to?

It will certainly be better for the future of the "profession" if there is an insistence in all quarters that teachers should have paper qualifications. This will not of course ensure that they will automatically receive the status that other professionals do. It is ironical that lawyers as a class are disliked both in Mexico and the United States, yet they enjoy absurdly high status. Why are engineers and architects treated like professionals, while teachers are not? Status is not conferred according to the logical application of criteria.

It is also sad but true that the more people earn, the higher their status. So English teachers are poorly paid because they have low status; and they have low status because they are poorly paid. So how can they break out of this vicious circle?

An alternative point of view on professionalism is that of Pieree (1993). He argues strongly in favor of regarding all language teaching operations, whether in the public or private sector as being basically open to free market conditions. Teaching, in his view, is a service which can be contracted. Status and pay will be established according to the value and quality of the services provided. If this is the case, the professionalism of language teachers remains in considerable doubt. Pierce argues that professional bodies are nothing more than trade unions in disguise: They protect their members and help to elevate their pay.

I must admit that I feel rather uneomfortable with this argument. It is as if anybody could wander into the classroom and begin to give a lesson. If the students like the class, then the teacher gets paid more. There are some universities in this country (Mexieo) where teachers' salaries can indeed be affected by their students' evaluations. I am against this policy. Teaching under these conditions could deteriorate into a popularity competition. It is not a teacher's job to be popular with the students: it is his/her job, however, to see that the students learn. Patients do not always like the medicine or advice they receive from the doetor.

Essentially, the danger in treating the student like a client is that of accepting the slogan, "The eustomer is always right." Students should be consulted, but they are not always right. Often what they want is not what they need. They have to accept the teacher's professional judgment on that point. That is why professional training and experience are so important.

**Conclusions**

It is a fact that the majority of English teachers in the world and in this country are not native speakers of the language. I have tried to show that:

1. The distinction between "native" and "non-native" speakers is not as clear-cut as most people assume.
2. Although there are real differences between the two groups of teachers, there are both advantages and disadvantages on both sides.
3. More important than nativeness is professional training and experience.
4. As EFL moves towards professionalism., the distinction between NEST's and non-NEST's will beeome less important.
5. Professionalism is not merely a question of paper qualifications and membership in professional bodies: it also involves a ehange of attitude and publie recognition of the new profession. This will not happen overnight, but it will happen.

The controversies surrounding nativeness and professionalism will remain open to discussion for some time; but I hope that teachers and employers of teachers will become less prejudiced and more rational in their attitudes. And I hope that the remaining years of tbis century will afford us greater justice in the situation of young Mexican professionals working in our field.

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