

Vintage Article

Editorial: In Defense of Non-Native Speaking Teachers¹

JoAnn Miller, Associate Editor

Many events have recently made me reflect on my position in the native-speaker / non-native speaker teacher debate. After more than twenty years in the English teaching community and dedicating most of those years to teacher training, I assumed I was quite open-minded and free from any prejudice in this matter. Obviously, I thought, it didn't make any difference if an English teacher was a native speaker or a non-native speaker. Some of my best friends and best students have been non-native speakers. However, I recently found myself saying things I thought I would never say. It happened this way...

My 15-year-old son has just begun his formal English studies. (He speaks and reads English, but he's "grammar illiterate".) After his first class at a well-known language school, I asked the typical questions: *What text are you using? (How much did it cost me?) How many students are in your class? Is your teacher British?* Wait! What was I saying?! Did I want his teacher to be British? After years of criticizing parents who demanded only native speakers for their children's classes, I was suddenly falling into the same trap.

Well, this started me thinking. Why would I want my son to have a native speaker as a teacher? What would the benefits really be?

In reality, a non-native speaker is probably a better teacher than many native-speakers. The majority of native speakers don't even know what the present perfect is, even if they might (just might) use it correctly. I remember when I first began teaching English seriously. I had been teaching Spanish for a few years at a university in the States and I had some idea of teaching methods (audio-lingual back then) and I had been studying for a doctorate in Spanish linguistics with a minor in English. I knew the differences between *por* and *para* and I could clearly explain the various uses of the past subjunctive. But I clearly remember the first time I was substituting an intermediate English class here in Mexico and I was told to "Just teach the past modals." Past modals? Past modals? I didn't even know what a modal was, let alone a past modal. Here I was with graduate studies in linguistics, a passing knowledge of Chomsky and I had no idea what a past modal was. Mexican teachers would have known because teacher training classes and their own experiences as English students would have prepared them for most grammatical problems. Native speakers have no reason to know the intricacies of their own language. How many native Spanish speakers can explain the subjunctive, or even know what it is?

Another weakness of native speakers as teachers isn't related to their lack of experience with the English grammatical system. It is related to their lack of contact with spoken

¹ The original article was published in the *MEXTESOL Journal*, Convention Issue, 1995. 19(2). This version is the same with a few corrected typos.

English. I rarely go to the States and my only contact with English outside the classroom is television, books, magazines and my fellow teachers, most who don't have much active contact with English either. As a "native-speaker" my students and colleagues see me as a gold mine of information. I'm sure they think: "Ah, she knows everything. She's a native speaker." Well, I don't know everything. In fact, I seem to know less and less every year, especially concerning vocabulary and cultural matters. I've been out of the States (or there, but in grad school, which is similar to being in an isolated monastery in the Himalayas) for more years than I lived there and as a result, my English is very limited and out-of-date. Don't ask me what occupations are popular in the computer field or what the parts of a car are or the name of a common tool or even the vocabulary related to having babies. I had my babies in Spanish! Any native speaker who has not had constant, active contact with the States can't know all the new vocabulary that is invented every year. Consequently, it is very easy for those of us who came to Mexico years ago, to never have learned that vocabulary related to experiences which we have lived in Mexico, but never in an English-speaking country. If you are in doubt, listen to two "older", native-speakers who have spent years in Mexico. How long can they speak English without using at least *one* Spanish word?

A native-speaking teacher? Well, there are some advantages. A native speaker can often feel minute distinctions (for example, related to prepositions). A native-speaker usually has a wider vocabulary than a non-native speaker (note the "usually"). However, neither of these advantages is really that important. A native-speaker might say *I clean house every Saturday*. While a non-native speaker might use a more general rule and say *I clean the house every Saturday*, but how important is this to our students? A young practice teacher of mine once told his students that a specific exercise was *as easy as cake*. How important for his students was it that the exercise was *as easy as cake* instead of *pie*. Perfection should always be our goal, but neither a native speaker nor a non-native speaker always reaches it.

These recent reflections of mine have given me a new respect for non-native teachers. I admire them. It probably hasn't been easy for them and they are much more prepared to guide their students over the road they have traveled than I, who took a short cut. They can be more patient than I, who often find myself tearing out my hair when my students just can't understand something that seems so natural to me. They have a love for the language. They chose to study it. I didn't.

Native-speaker or non-native speaker? Does it really matter? Teachers are more than just where or when they learn their English. Teachers are the result of the time and creativity they dedicate to their classes and their own professional preparation. Teachers are understanding of their students and understanding of their students' culture and their problems. Teachers are the love they give their students and their profession. These qualities have nothing to do with what kind of English is spoken. They have to do with being a teacher. Let us leave this myth of the "superior" native-speaking teacher behind us and encourage others to do so too.