Research Issues

Nonnative English Speaking Professionals: A New Agenda For A New Millenium

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This is an abridged version of a featured talk given at the 1999 MEXTESOL Conference, in Mazatlan. The oral character of the talk has been preserved.

How many of us have heard something like: "I don't want my child to be taught by a nonnative English speaker" but now find that same parent to be our greatest supporter.

How many of us have felt that our schools and departments favor native English-speaking teachers but now find the same institutions promoting projects that require collaboration and cooperation between native and nonnative English-speaking professionals?

How many of us have felt self-doubt because of our status as nonnative English-speaking teachers only to find that our students view us as their role models?

I am sure that these experiences are not unique to me or to some of you reading this article. It is against these background questions that I will examine some of the

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emerging themes arising from current research on nonnative English-speaking professionals. I will then discuss ways in which all of us, nonnative and native English-speaking professionals, can collaborate and act proactively to advance the cause of nonnative English-speakers in the TESOL profession.

What are the Emerging Themes Arising from Current Research on Nonnative English-speaking Professionals?

Up until the mid 1990's, research on nonnative English-speaking professionals published by nonnative English speakers was almost very limited except for a couple of articles and a book by Peter Medgyes (1986; 1994). Currently, it is possible to identify three themes arising from current research on nonnative English-speaking professionals:

1. Advantages and disadvantages of being a nonnative English speaking professional (Amin, 1997; Kamhi-Stein, 1999; Kamhi-Stein, Lee, & Lee, 1999; Medgyes, 1986; 1994; 1996; Reves & Medgyes, 1994; Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999; Tang, 1997);
2. administrators' and students' attitudes toward nonnative English-speaking professionals in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts (Marquez, 1998; Medgyes, 1994; Wei, 1997); and
3. personal accounts, personal histories of nonnative English-speaking professionals (Connor, 1999; Thomas, 1999).
4.

There is a fourth theme that is beginning to emerge in the literature. This theme focuses on the meaning and implications of the native and nonnative English-speaker labels (Liu, 1999).

Briefly, I will summarize findings within each of the three major areas:

1. Advantages and disadvantages of being a nonnative English-speaking professional. The researchers cited above agree that nonnative English speakers are role models of successful language learners, they can use their status to raise their students' confidence that they can achieve success in learning English. Nonnative English speakers also have an enhanced understanding of their students' needs. As noted by Medgyes (1994), having gone through the L2 learning process and sharing their students' mother tongue makes nonnative English speakers better predictors of their students' language needs and problems. Empathy is another advantage unique to nonnative speaking teachers. Their nonnative status allows them to better understand their students' feelings and frustrations.

In addition to these attributes, I have found that former English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners have an enhanced knowledge of grammar. My own research shows that the grammar knowledge that teachers have gained as EFL students promotes a feeling of self-confidence in their ability to teach grammar (Kamhi-Stein, Lee, & Lee, 1999). On the other hand, according to Tang (1997) and Medgyes (1994), nonnative English-speaking teachers are disadvantaged in the areas of fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, listening comprehension, and in contrast to my research, grammar. Much like Tang (1997) and Medgyes (1994) I, in collaboration with Lee and Lee (1999) have found that nonnative English-speaking teachers have language needs. For example, a group of experienced and novice teachers from a nonnative English-speaking background reported that no matter how much they studied, it would be impossible for them to know all the idioms, slang, or cultural history that native English speakers have acquired over a lifetime. However, the experienced teachers admitted that after working in the field for some time, they had learned to accept their limitations and felt self-assured to admit to those needs. Here is what an experienced nonnative English-speaking teacher had to say about this issue:

> "There's nothing wrong with who I am and what I am. I accept myself the way I am. ....It takes a lot of struggle [to accept yourself] and I guess I read a lot of books and psychology has a lot to do with that. I learned to feel comfortable with myself and that has a lot to do with self-esteem too. So I think you look at yourself, within yourself as a whole person. Teaching experience definitely helps..."

Another important concern expressed by the novice teachers in my study was their lack of self-confidence. When I make the point that novice teachers are affected by a lack of self-confidence, practicum supervisors, who are native English speakers, usually ask: Well, isn't that typical of all novice teachers? My response to this question is the following: If all novice teachers feel lack of confidence, novice nonnative English-speaking teachers often are two times less confident and twice as unsure.

What is the result of this lack of confidence? Low self-efficacy. It is not uncommon to find nonnative English-speaking teachers who spend a lot of time and effort preparing, and many times overpreparing for classes in order to make up for their nonnativeness. It is by overpreparing that nonnative English speakers expect to gain the respect of their students and colleagues. For example, this was the case of Elis, an Asian teacher born and raised in Brazil who immigrated to the US in her early 20s and obtained her MA degree at CSULA. Elis found herself working twice as hard as any of her colleagues in order to gain the acceptance of her students.

Another result of lack of confidence seems to be the teachers' career choices. In

the study by Kamhi-Stein, Lee, and Lee (1999), novice and experienced nonnative English-speaking teachers reported feeling more comfortable teaching children or beginning-level adult students rather than advanced students because of "lower student expectation." One of the participants in my study said the following:

> It was my non-native speaker status that led me to teach kindergarten. I never felt that my language skills were good enough to teach older students.

I (Kamhi-Stein, 1999) have also found nonnative English speakers to be concerned with the lack of role models and lack of voice which results in their alienation and isolation, a finding also supported by Thomas (1999). I am not at all surprised by this finding since only recently, with the formation of the Nonnative English Speakers in TESOL Caucus, have nonnative English speakers begun to raise their voice. When in my own TESOL MA program, I began to address issues related to nonnative English speakers in various courses, it was not uncommon to hear students say things like:

> I felt wonderful [discussing issues related to NNESs [because it made me reevaluate my own fear and it's now easy to allow my feelings to open. It makes me think of the solution. What can I do to overcome a certain problem? I'm not the only one who has problems. Other people share similar situations. I remember...I said...Lia felt that way, I felt that way too. Up to that point I felt I was the only one. ... When Teresa [another participant] shared her experience I thought, I'm not the only one. It's nice to know people go through the same process.

A further disadvantage observed by the nonnative English speakers in my study was prejudice based on ethnicity. In the study by Kamhi-Stein, Lee, and Lee (1999) it was the Latinos/as teaching in the US, and not those teaching EFL in Latin America, who expressed their concern about this issue. As a former EFL teacher and program administrator in Argentina, I agreed with EFL teachers that in Latin America hiring is done on the bases of qualification and preparation. However, recently I received an e-mail message from an Argentine EFL teacher with a Master's degree from a US university. In her message, this highly qualified teacher called to my attention recent hiring and advertising practices in Argentina requesting that "Nonnative English speakers need not apply." I am not sure whether this situation is unique to Argentina and to the "proceso de globalización" that the country is experiencing. Given that Mexico and Argentina are going through the same economic transformation process, it would be interesting to look at hiring practices in the two countries.

In the study by Kamhi-Stein, Lee, and Lee (1999), it was the Asian participants who were the most concerned about prejudice on the basis of ethnicity. The Asian

participants expressed their concern regarding hiring practices in Asian countries where native English speakers, regardless of whether or not they have had TESOL training, have an advantage over Asians with training and experience in the TESOL field. However, the teachers noted that prejudice in Asian countries is not limited to administrators and instead, it can be extended to students and parents who often demand that they and their children be taught by teachers who fit the "American stereotype" – blond and blue-eyed.

Another disadvantage identified by the nonnative English-speaking professionals in Kamhi-Stein, Lee, and Lee (1999) was prejudice based on accentedness. Accentedness was perceived to be an important factor in judging the language skills and teaching ability of nonnative English speakers. Teachers argued that in contrast to children, adults and young adults sometimes challenge the credibility of their teachers on the basis of their accent. As noted by Amin (1999), there's a belief that only a White accent qualifies teachers to be native speakers.

2. Administrators' and students' attitudes toward nonnative English-speaking professionals in ESL contexts (Marquez, 1998; Medgyes, 1994; Wei, 1997). Marquez investigated the hiring practices of three community colleges and five Intensive English Programs (IEP) in a large metropolitan area. In her study, Marquez (1998) found that for community college administrators, the native/nonnative distinction was not a consideration when hiring professionals. When hiring ESL teachers, administrators took into account training and qualification. I have found that this is very much the case in Southern California community colleges, where nonnative English speakers are valued in many ways. For example, Kathleen Flynn (1999), Director of the Credit ESL Program at Glendale Community College, recently published an article in which she described the attributes that compel her to hire NNES teachers. Included in the list of attributes are: the patience with students which is sometimes lacking in monolingual speakers of English, the ability to serve as a role model, and intercultural awareness. Flynn argues that nonnative English speakers who want to be hired by a community college should have a good grasp of grammar, an easy to understand accent, and an understanding of US cultural norms of classroom behavior.

Marquez (1998) found that, in contrast to community college administrators, IEP directors did not favor hiring nonnative English-speaking professionals. As indicated by an administrator she interviewed, IEP directors were part of a consortium of ESL program directors in the area that had a policy of not hiring nonnative English speakers. However, these results should be taken with extreme caution and should not, in any way, be generalized. For example, I have found that many IEP administrators in California do hire nonnative English speakers. However, it is unclear to me the

extent to which these professionals are retained after two or three years on the job.

Marquez (1998) and Wei (1997) found that students did not have preconceived preferences for either native or nonnative English-speaking professionals. The ESL students in Marquez's study assumed that whoever stood in front of them the first day of class was qualified to teach. Additionally, the more courses students had taken from nonnative English-speaking professionals the more positive they were toward nonnative English-speaking professionals. Much like the students in Marquez's study, the students in Wei's research stated that the key to being a successful teacher was training and not nativeness in English. For these students, the components of successful teaching were "teaching skills," "understanding the L2 culture," "teacher training," and "English language competence." Wei (1997) also found that students believed in the facilitative role of nonnative English-speaking professionals. ESL students reported that their nonnative English-speaking teachers' learning experiences helped them understand their students' problems and needs. They also said that their own status as nonnative English speakers was positive for building ESL/EFL student confidence. On the other hand, Wei found that while more than half of the students he surveyed were not uncomfortable having nonnative English-speaking teachers, nearly 20% indicated they did not feel comfortable with nonnative English-speaking teachers.

3. Personal accounts, personal histories of nonnative English-speaking professionals. Only recently have personal accounts begun to be published. I would like to highlight the book edited by George Braine (1999) titled Nonnative Educators in English Language Teaching. In this book there is a very powerful chapter by Jacinta Thomas. In her chapter, Jacinta Thomas describes the many challenges faced by nonnative English-speaking professionals. These include discriminatory hiring practices, organizational invisibility, student challenges, and peer challenges. In her chapter, she further discusses how the experiences that challenge her credibility make her apologetic and nervous about her ability to succeed and sometimes lead her to some kind of paranoia.

The second chapter George Braine's book that I would like to highlight is the one by Ulla Connor. Ulla Connor is the author of more than 50 published articles, two edited books and one sole-authored book. In her chapter, Ulla Connor (1999) describes her development as a writer in English as a second language as a graduate student after moving to the United States. Central to Ulla Connor's chapter is her message: Don't give up. Keep writing and presenting.

How Can All of Us, Nonnative and Native English-speaking Professionals Act Proactively to Advance the Cause of Nonnative English-speaking Professionals in the TESOL Field?

In this section, I would like to suggest ways in which nonnative and native English speaking professionals can work together to advance the cause of nonnative English-speaking professionals in the TESOL field. This section includes five suggestions:

1. Engage in collaborative projects with native English-speaking professionals. It is important that native and nonnative English-speaking professionals team-teach and collaborate in the development of curricula and materials. A collaborative approach assumes that both native and nonnative English-speaking professionals have strengths (Matsuda, forthcoming) and that they can learn from one another. This collaboration can only result in stronger curricula and teaching practices, and these will ultimately benefit EFL/ESL students.

2. Give conference presentations and write articles and papers addressing issues related to nonnative English-speaking professionals. Currently, there are very few articles and books focusing on issues related to nonnative English speakers conducted by nonnative English-speaking professionals. It is important that nonnative English-speaking professionals give conference presentations and write articles addressing issues related to nonnative English-speaking professionals if they want to have a stronger presence in the TESOL field. Mexican EFL teachers could not be in a better position to do this; they have access to EFL students and native and nonnative English-speaking colleagues. Some of the topics they could write about or give conference presentations on include successful practices; EFL students' attitudes toward nonnative English-speaking professionals and hiring and retention practices in different Mexican cities.

3. Join the newly formed Nonnative English Speakers in MEXTESOL Interest Group (IG) and become active IG members. The Interest Group was established under the leadership of Peter Hubbard during the MEXTESOL '99 Conference. It is only by becoming active IG members that the activities of the IG will reflect the interests, needs, and wants of nonnative English-speaking professionals in Mexico.

4. Volunteer to mentor/network newcomers to the profession. One of the most successful practices that I have seen develop in my TESOL MA program is that of newcomers being mentored by experienced nonnative English-speaking professionals. This practice involves having successful nonnative English-speaking practitioners model exemplary practices for novice nonna-

tive English-speaking professionals and show them that they also can achieve in the profession. This practice allows novice nonnative English-speaking professionals to develop a first hand understanding of how successful nonnative English speakers manage the demands of the second language classroom. As one of the participants in the study by Kamhi-Stein, Lee, and Lee (1999) put it:

> It's important to have role models [referring to a non-native English-speaking mentor teacher], no matter what you learn about nonnative English-speaking professionals and how much you study issues related to nonnative English speakers, if you don't have a role model, the topic does not seem real, authentic.

5. Teacher educators need to redesign the curricula of TESOL teacher programs. Teacher educators need to work into their curricula discussions and activities related to nonnative English speakers. In my case, I chose to implement a cross-curricular approach. In this approach, issues related to nonnative English speakers are integrated across the curricula of courses like Educational Sociolinguistics, Theories of Teaching and Learning Second Languages, Practicum in Teaching English as a Second Language. In doing this, I wanted to provide my students with multiple opportunities to systematically examine the nonnativeness issue in relation to theories of language acquisition, teaching methodologies and curriculum design, and cultural and social factors affecting L2 development. There is a second approach to the integration of curricula relevant to nonnative English speakers. In this approach, discussions on issues related to nonnative English-speaking professionals are integrated into the syllabus of a seminar. This approach, proposed by Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999), is implemented at Ohio State University, where Keiko Samimy offers a seminar on nonnative English speakers open to all students.

Conclusion.

To my knowledge, MEXTESOL is the first affiliate to establish a Nonnative English Speakers in MEXTESOL Interest Group. MEXTESOL has taken a critical step in addressing issues that impact nonnative English-speaking professionals. Since it was in Mexico that the concept of the "ola" was created, I think it is appropriate that all MEXTESOL members, native and nonnative English speakers alike, unite and begin a new "ola," one on behalf of all the nonnative English speaking professionals in Mexico.

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