

Non-Native English Instructors: Resistance is Futile

Tatsuhiko Paul Nagasaka

Abstract

This is to report a study based on three in-depth interviews to non-native EFL educators, who are currently teaching at a private university in Saitama, which is an adjacent prefecture to Tokyo, Japan. The school is proud of her rich tradition and advanced environment in language education.

*A part of this paper was read as “The non-native English instructors: the next Generation” at ACE 2011 in Osaka, Japan on October 29 2011. After the presentation the paper was edited and added new data and discussion.

Introduction

One of the popular Internet trivia asks: “Among 44 US presidents, who is the one whose first language was not English?” A popular joke response is George W. Bush Jr. but it is not the correct answer. History books say that van Buren, the 8th President, spoke Dutch, his family language, before English, which he learned at school. Did the fact disqualify him as the President of the United States of America? Obviously it did not. He fulfilled the duty as a President. He did the office work, gave orders, talked with his colleagues, and gave speech, talked to his political opponents in English. Apparently, being a speaker of English as the 2nd language was not, and perhaps still is not, an important qualification in the CV of the world most demanding post. Then, does it really matter to be an EFL/ESL instructor?

The Study

This is to report a study, which is based on in-depth interviews to three non-

native EFL educators and a series of private talks with the students in some of the classes taught by the interviewees. To protect privacy, their names are pseudonyms and students' assessments (conducted by the school at the end of each course) on the instructors' performance will not be discussed.

Non-native English educators? Who are they?

1) Where are they from?

EFL educators can be roughly divided into the following three groups in the areas outside the English core, namely the USA; the UK, and other English speaking areas, such as in Japan and Korea:

The first groups, the Locals

Local EFL educators (in the context of this study, the majority is the native speakers of Japanese. Obviously there are substantial number of Japanese EFL educators who grew up in abroad, speaking English or the language of the host country as their first language, they may be categorized into another group: bilingual educators. It is out of the scope of this small study to investigate them as a separate group.)

The second group, the Native Speakers

They are EFL educators from the core areas, which are the countries where English is spoken as the single or the main official language. The United States of America, the UK, Canada, Australia, Nigeria, Ireland, New Zealand, and Jamaica fall into this group. It is rather ambiguous if the areas such as Francophone Canada, or the countries such as Nigeria, and South Africa fall in this category but the discussion will be suspended due to the scope of this study. In a way, they are from the areas which can be described as the Inner circle.

The third group, the Non Natives English Educators (These educators are the target group of this study)

Teachers/educators who are originally from non-English speaking countries, periphery areas, where the first or major official language is not English. Once again, the definition is very confusing and even contradicting, but educators from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, many of Ex-British colonials in Africa, Singapore, and Malaysia fall into this group. They can be described as the Outer circle or the Periphery

2) What are their characteristics?

A simple definition/description does not fit Non-Native EFL educators. Their only common feature is that they are NOT from the Inner circle countries. Characteristics, such as educational cultural/ethnic backgrounds, vary greatly from individual to individual. The variety is, however, one of the most important resource for EFL.

3) Where are they going?

As the world is being globalized, it is safe to say that they are going to everywhere. Is the EFL/ESL job market open enough for those relatively new comers? That is the question to ask for the betterment of the overall upgrade of the quality of teaching EFL/ESL.

The interviews:

Case One: Worf



Worf is from a country in the central Africa, which was an ex-British colony. He grew up as a speaker of an indigenous language, which has no written form yet. It is spoken as one of several local languages around the area. He was educated in English and studied in Britain later in his life. His conduct of the English is that of a native British English speaker (with a slight hint of Britishness). It is well observed that his “British-ness is intensified by his calm and “elegant” attitudes (private communication with Worf’s students).



Case Two: Tubok

Tubok is from another former ex-British colony in the western Africa. He was educated both in English and in the local language. He received college education in USA, majored theology. After experiencing rather unique careers, he started teaching EFL in Japan.

Both Worf and Tubok are very popular among their students and colleagues respect their professional attitude. Among the positive effects they can provide is that they can provide role models for EFL learners. As they themselves are successful EFL/ESL learners, they can be good pilots for the young EFL learners. They know how difficult it is to learn English as a foreign or second language and get highly educated in the language which is not their own tongue. They can also act as the first-hand source of global, multi-cultures, and cultural pluralism. They are the Next Generations. Their personal adventure and achievements are well worthy for biographies but it is beyond the scope of this short report.

Case Three: Uhla

Uhla is, in a sense, a true new breed. She is from a country in the Indian subcontinent. Her first language is one of the major local languages, an Indo-European. She and her family speak some other local languages, too. She was educated in a local language and English in her country. After finishing undergraduate education in her home country, she came to Japan, gained a PhD from a private Japanese university. She speaks English with tones of Indian subcontinental taste. Some of her student described her accent is “like a bird singing.” She should be considered an example of bi-lingual (or multi-lingual) person and in



that sense she is different from the first two interviewees. She should better be treated as whom Kachuru would have called a native speaker of Indian English.

The Ownership of English

A question arises here: Whose possession is English? After listening to the three interviewees, it seems all the more difficult to categorize English into three different fixed zones: Inner circle, Outer circle, and Periphery. People move and spread all over the world. English becomes their tongue, not the other tongue. It is also intriguing that this kind of spread of language is taking place in the former Eastern Europe. In this case, the language is not English but German (Stevenson and Carl, 2010).

Another implication is the relationship between identity and the language. With whom do the students of the Next Generation Educators identify them?

The last but not least important implication is the relationship between education and language. Looking at education from a broader perspective of English as a means of teaching/learning, it is no longer possible to give/receive higher education in one's first language alone, except in a few highly industrialized nations. Rather, getting higher education in one's own language alone could be a disadvantage. In countries such as Singapore, English is no longer a subject of learning but the means of learning. One may ask, "Can English (or any other language) stand alone without its cultural/historical representation?" For the time being, perhaps the answer is no, English inevitably is the flagship aircraft carrier with the Anglo-American, Canadian, and Australian and of New Zealand national flags on the flattop, but in the future, it may hoist different colors.

Issues for the Future

As more non-native EFL educators enter the already crowded job market, quality of education can be an issue. Proficiency and professional morals of the non-native educators must be kept high for the overall betterment of the professional field.

Do non-native educators provide equally good or even better EFL/ESL education? Asking this question seems to be nonsense because being non-native is the value. Their unique cultural backgrounds provide role models as successful/positive learner. The necessary change is our attitudes. It should be from doubt to acceptance and integration (Should cultural awareness be a part of EFL education? Yes.)

Conclusion

As the people of the world become more and more interdependent, it is crucial for us all to have keener cultural awareness and tolerance. Mutual understanding, if not agreement, is not possible without understanding each other through language, face-to-face if possible. Even now, millions of e-mail messages are being sent and received and millions of people are twitting on the Internet. Do we have deeper mutual understanding? Are we more tolerant to each other? Unfortunately, no, but can we change ourselves? Hope the answer be yes. Let's see what's out there.

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