The plight of non-native *English-speaking* teachers of languages in the teaching profession: A case of African teachers of English

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Abstract

Although the current corpus of English Language Teaching [ELT] literature acknowledges the fact that being a successful and effective English Language teacher goes beyond one's linguistic heritage as a native speaker of the language, Non-Native English Speakers (NNES) still face marginalization in regard to their professional credibility and proficiency as English Language teachers. While studies on this issue have predominantly focused on the plight of teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in many countries, there has been limited research on balanced bilingual teachers of English in African countries –such as Uganda and Rwanda who, in fact, are native speakers of more than one language. This paper aims at reviewing the recent literature on the plight of non-native English speakers teaching English language as a profession. It intends to specifically highlight the issues faced by teachers of English who may not necessarily fit snugly into the Native and Non-Native dichotomy. Relevant research on job marginalization, accents, and student's perceptions will be discussed.

Key words: English as a foreign language, native-non-native English speaking teachers, marginalization

Introduction

'*A teacher's effectiveness does not hinge upon whether he or she is a native or non native speaker of English'* (Medgyes, 1992: 348). This quotation focuses on one of the most contentious issue that has been explored by numerous language teachers, educators and researchers in regard to the teaching of English language (Amin, 1997; Canagarajah, 1999; Cook, 1999; Davies, 2003; Liu, 1999; Phillipson, 1992a or b) The categorisation of English teachers as either '*native speakers'* or '*non-native speakers',* and how this is eventually reflected in their teaching practices, has been a subject of debate for the English language teaching profession (Holliday, 2005).

Some writers argue that the 'native speaker' should be the definitive model for English language learning and teaching (Cook, 1999). While others assert that 'non native English speaking' teachers are more realistic models for teaching and learning the English language because of their shared experience in learning a foreign, second or additional language (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 1999; Jenkins, 2000; Milambiling, 2000). On the other hand, scholars such as Phillipson (1992a) and Rampton (1990) maintain that being a 'native speaker' of a language does not necessarily translate into one's ability to teach the language. While Jenkins (2000) recognises that the 'native' and 'non native English speaker' dichotomy does not take into consideration speakers of English from bilingual and multilingual societies where English is one of the many languages simultaneously learnt and spoken and as such becomes difficult to determine whether English is the first or second language learnt. As a result the 'native' and 'non-native' labels have been contested by a variety of scholars citing numerous problems with using this terminology to categorise various speakers and teachers of English. This is because the terms often imply subordination of one

group over another. In such a case, the n*ative speaker* is considered better than his/her n*on-native* counterpart (Arva & Medgyes, 2000; Rampton, 1990,).

While new terms of reference such as the more and/or less accomplished speakers, or bilingual and monolingual speakers, have been deemed better. This reflects the complexity of the two categories of speakers and the level of discrimination of 'non-native' English Speaking Teachers (NNEST's) held by their native counterparts, employment organisations and even students; and it still exists in the English Language Teaching profession (Braine, 2005; Jenkins, 2000;).

Therefore, the aim of this literature based article is to present, analyse the literature and discuss major issues related to the stance of the 'non native' speaker in English language teaching worldwide. In particular, I will discuss the plight of the non-native English teacher who is a balanced bilingual and as such, is fluent in both English as well as the mother tongue having learnt both simultaneously as a child. And so, their efforts to be viewed as capable English teachers is hampered by the judgemental limitations that they encounter from the profession mostly solely based on their linguistic heritage. Issues such as professional credibility, marginalisation, proficiency, race, identity, stereotypes, strengths and weaknesses that have been discussed and explored by a variety of literature in the field will also be discussed in this essay. In addition, because identity and self perception of teachers' inevitably contribute to their roles in the classroom, this article will also establish the roles of 'non native' teachers in both monolingual and multilingual classrooms in ensuring that the current stereotypes and fallacies about what is appropriate Standard English are rectified. Tang (1997) states that 'the identity of an individual is not fixed but is developed and accentuated by being compared with others' (577). Hence, this essay is significant because of the need to address this particular demographic of teachers who are equally vital for the profession.

For the purpose of this article, the term ESL will be used demographically to refer only to speakers from multilingual 'former British colony' countries such as Uganda where English is used as a second as well as official language. The term EFL will be used to refer to speakers from multilingual African countries such as Rwanda where English is neither a native or official language but is considered a foreign language as it is relatively new in that context. Also the short forms of the terminologies, TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs) and Non Native English Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) will be used. The terms '*native'* and '*non-native speakers'* will be written with inverted commas to represent their ambiguity as will be discussed in this article. Occasional reference will also be made to the African context being African and having had educational and teaching experience in African countries.

Background of NESTs and NNESTs in English language teaching

Phillipson (1992a: 195) writes that: "*The very idea of claiming that the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker is ludicrous as soon as one starts identifying the good qualities of a teacher of English"* This quotation represents the ongoing debate between scholars, writers and educators on English speaking teachers are more effective at teaching

the English language, whether **'**native' or 'non-native'. Various definitions and characteristics of what 'native' and 'non-native' speakers of English should possess have been presented.

Writers like Pennycook (1994) suggest that in order for one to belong to the category of the 'native speaker', they must have an innate competence of the language. In addition Llurda (2005) has argued that a native speaker of a language is one who speaks the language that was first learnt in early childhood. It is however important to note that one of the major assumptions being made in these arguments is that the ability to teach English is inborn and that being a part of a society by virtue of birth and ancestry automatically translates into communicative competence (Rampton, 1990). In fact Lurda (2005) implies that the process of learning a language is linear; whereby a person learns one language at a time. This is a rather simplistic argument because what has not been considered though, is the fact that in some multilingual ESL countries particularly in Africa and India, two or more languages are learnt simultaneously in the same period of time such that it is very difficult to ascertain which language was learnt first, in order to determine one's first or second language (Davies, 2003; Filho, 2002; Holliday, 2005; Jenkins, 2003). Often speakers in these contexts learn English during their childhood stages, either simultaneously; where the language is acquired at the same time together with the language of the home or sequentially; where a child learns the language of the home, then goes to a nursery or elementary school and learns a second language (Baker, 2001: 87).

Similarly, although Leung, Harris and Rampton (1997) identify '*bilinguals'* who speak English and a local language in two different contexts, for example school versus home, they still do not consider people who either use English and their local language concurrently, both at home and at school, through code switching (Cook, 1999; Rubagumya, 1994;). Also, speakers who are more proficient in English than their local languages are not considered. For example; this is common in ESL contexts where teenagers lack the ability to read or write using their local languages, but can communicate effectively using all four skills of English. In addition Davies (2003) asserts that the argument that the language one learns first is their native language represents the myopic monolingual perspective of a small number of people belonging to "Kachru's inner circle of English". He argues that 'a highly proficient non native speaker [in this context] may also have acquired both linguistic and communicative competence and be... in terms of what is required in ...Standard English, indistinguishable from a native speaker' (8). In addition, Braine (2005) further emphasises the fact that 'native speakers' themselves do not speak the idealized, standardized version of the language any more than 'non-native speakers', both groups are influenced in their speech 'by geography, occupation, age and social status' (4). Some writers have presented distinct features of NESTs that set them apart from their 'non native' counterparts, such as a subconscious knowledge of rules and creative use of language (Cook, 1999; Milambiling 2000; Phillipson, 1992b).

While it is apparent that numerous writers agree that there are variations within the 'non native speaker' category, the subordinate term still persists in the ELT profession. The implication is that there is a level of ignorance about the different classifications within the demographic as the standard of measure used to determine the proficiency of a non native English speaker does not take those variations into consideration. Rather, often the same

measure used to judge a speaker's English proficiency from typical monolingual EFL (English as a foreign language) countries are similar to those used on an ESL multilingual teacher who has a near native command of the language (Baker, 2001). However, it is important to mention that the aforementioned teachers are in fact starkly different.

The balanced bilingual/multilingual English speaker/teacher – the English speaking African

From the African perspective, as well as from other ESL countries, the multilingual English speaking teachers are in a dilemma of sorts, because he or she does not fit snugly into the 'native' or 'non-native'* division, having often times learnt, simultaneously, both her/his mother-tongue and English right from early childhood (Filho, 2002; Jenkins, 2000; Medgyes, 1992; Rampton, 1990). Therefore they are '*bilinguals who are native speakers of more than one language'* (Davies, 2003: 5). These are also referred to as balanced bilinguals; who are fluent in two languages (Baker, 2001). Therefore, according to the standards presented by writers on the ideal teacher of English, this particular teacher should be well equipped to ably teach the language, having acquired both proficiency in the language and appropriate teacher training skills/methodology. However, there is still marginalisation of this category of teacher of English dubbing her/him* un-equivalent of or not equal to the 'native speaker' usually because of their accent and race (Braine, 2005; Brutt-Griffler and Samimy, 1999;).

Although TESOL organisations have publicly opposed discrimination of non native speakers in regard to hiring practices and differential contracts, it is still a very common phenomenon in the professional world of English Language Teaching (Liu, 1999). Some well qualified NNESTs have attested to the struggle and frustration at their inability to secure jobs based solely on the fact that they are not citizens of English speaking countries such as America, Britain or Australia (Holliday, 2005). The assumption here is that someone who is not a native speaker of English, by virtue of their race or country of origin, cannot speak '*proper'* English. In fact, Filho (2002) gives an example of this (NNEST's) marginalisation when he highlights the level of ignorance and insensitivity in the words spoken/used by a '*native speaker',* at a Language Teaching Convention, who said *"when we recruit, we tell students that they will only be taught by native English speakers. After all, these students do not come so far to be taught by someone who does not speak English"* (20). Braine (2005) recognises the irony when he observes that while writers and scholars unequivocally acknowledge the diversity that NNEST's contribute in the teaching of English classes. However, the NNEST's are still being shunned from English teaching jobs because of this "diversity". Consequently they have been forced to accept that they will have to 'struggle twice as hard to achieve what often comes as birth right to their non native speaker counterparts [including] recognition of their teaching ability and respect for their scholarship' (Braine, 2005: 1). In order to understand the plight of NNESTs, it is important to highlight student perceptions of their NNESTs.

Students' perceptions of their non-native English speaking teachers of English

In Africa, the concept of English, as a language of the rich and educated, holds true in many contexts; as pointed out by language researchers (Makoni & Meinhof, 2003; Rubagumya, 1994). In the context of Education, English is regarded as a class marker where one's proficiency in the language sets them apart from the uneducated. It also implies social, economic and academic success (Canagarajah, 1999). Through textbooks, novels and the media's portrayal of the western world, students are constantly bombarded with images of English as a means to success. In particular the teaching material, in form of textbooks, is predominantly western; and as such the references used are often foreign and in most cases not applicable to the real lives of the students. On the other hand, the "*African textbooks*" are filled with images of starving, poor children and wild animals often serve to reinforce students' perception of Africa as a poor and primitive continent that has nothing else to offer to the world but tourism (Ndura, 2004). Unfortunately, some of these students are unaware that most of these ESL materials are quite stereotypical in their portrayal of cultures and that they sometimes exaggerate and generalise people and events (Clouet, 2006). These stereotypes often are detrimental to students' perception of their own culture in comparison to others and worse still in the way they perceive their local English teachers especially in comparison to the western teachers.

Some language learners have been known to shun English teachers who are not viewed as typically American, British or Australian regarding them incapable of teaching a language that is not theirs (Filho, 2002; Jenkins, 2000; Rampton, 1990). This constant comparison unconsciously and unfortunately asserts the fact that one group is better than the other, rather than all are unique and contribute to society in different ways. Students in ESL contexts often regard 'Standard British English' as the standard for English proficiency; many of course unaware of the validity of other Standard English varieties (Milambiling, 2000; Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992a). As a result when presented with the opportunity to be taught by NESTs, English students tend to disregard their local teachers deeming them inappropriate to teach the language (Amin, 1997). Ironically, although the ratio of 'non native' to 'native speakers' of English is 4: 1 and is steadily rising, their status as English language educators and teachers has been neglected as they are often considered clones to NEST's (Arva and Medgyes, 2000; Braine, 2005; Brutt-Griffler and Samimy, 1999). Therefore, the elevation of NESTs as ideal English teachers 'has obscured the distinctive nature of the successful L2 user and [as such] created an unattainable goal for L2 learners' who now desire to be like the 'native speaker' (Cook, 1999: 185).

Similarly a number of scholars, educators and writers have discovered that language learners often assume that there is an inherent connection between language proficiency and race, and that they will often prefer white teachers to non white teachers (Brutt-Griffler and Samimy, 1999; Rampton, 1990). Consequently, *'this association of the native speaker with the ownership of English and good pedagogy dis-empowers the non white teacher who ... is constructed as a non native speaker on the basis of race'* (Amin, 1997: 582). As a result this causes negative self perceptions and lack of confidence in their ability to teach this language, that they already have communicative linguistic competence and professional teacher training (Jenkins, 2000).

In my own experience of teaching English in an international school in Uganda, I found this attitude towards NNESTs to be true. Students and their parents adamantly requested white teachers to teach English instead of local teachers, citing reasons such as race and accent as their preference. In fact, some of these *'native English speakers'* were unqualified teachers but were requested to replace their non native counterparts in those English classes. Therefore in order for most NNESTs to gain credibility from their students, they are often pressured to approximate their pronunciation and accent as close as possible to considered *'native speaker'* standards (Amin, 1997). This situation is also similar to other 'non native' English speaking teachers in other contexts (Liu, 1999). One of the issues commonly discussed by writers in this field is ascertaining how different the two categories of teachers are in regards to their strengths and weaknesses in teaching English as discussed in the next section

NESTs teaching methodology and the issue of accents

There has been a lot of discussion and contention, about the issue of effectiveness in regard to NESTs and NNESTs in the field of English language teaching. Educators and writers have presented arguments on who is better or more equipped to teach the English Language. Some have argued that the native speaker presents a more appropriate teaching pedagogy because of their natural oral fluency, understanding cultural references and connotations, understanding and using language in context as well as having a wide range of vocabulary (Graddol, 2003; Phillipson, 1992).

On the other hand, other writers have argued that NNESTs are able to use their own knowledge and experiences of learning the language and therefore are likely to understand learners' needs as well as being a representative of a more achievable model for learning the language (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 1999; Medgyes, 1994; Milambiling, 2000). In fact Jenkins (2003) argues that even multilingual 'native speakers' of English who have acquired other languages do not have experience in learning English as a second or foreign language. Similarly, she asserts that the shared experience of learning English as a second or foreign language between the teachers and the students should act as a boost of confidence for NNESTs who have 'been through the process of learning the same language, often through the same L1 filter [,] ... the native speaker knows the destination but not the terrain that that has to be crossed to get there; they themselves have not travelled the same route' (219).

However, ESL teachers' will sometimes find that the contributions that NNESTs make to their classroom as discussed above are sometimes not as relatable. This is because these teachers often classified as the 'non native speaker' by western writers do not share much of a similarity with their students that most writers often allude to. Due to the fact that their acquisition of English happened in the early childhood stages, there is hardly any memory or recollection of the processes of acquisition. Similarly, because there were two languages being learnt during the same period of time, one hardly remembers what challenges and obstacles they faced during this process of language acquisition. Therefore they might not be as helpful to their students as the NNESTs in EFL countries who usually learn English when they are old enough to comprehend the processes of language acquisition. Often the

similarity for the ESL teachers and their students is the similar multilingual and multicultural background and experiences (Holliday, 2005; Medgyes, 1992;).

Also, because of the long periods of exposure to the language, most aspects of the language including oral fluency and a rich source of vocabulary; aspects often associated with the 'native speaker' are second nature to them. Therefore how these teachers are judged as non native speakers of English while possessing both aspects of 'native' and 'non native' speaking traits is unfair. Often, the issue of accent then becomes a major criterion, used by students, NESTs and administrators in judging whether the non native English teacher is effective or not (Braine, 2005). Medgyes (1992: 346) argues that the issue of accents is the single most contentious issue in the ELT profession and the one of the causes of the discrimination of the NNESTs, asserting that 'because there are other variables in the teaching process to be considered such as; age, sex aptitude, charisma, motivation [and] training; language competence alone cannot be the one determinant for effective teaching... but [unfortunately] is the only variable in which the non-NEST is inevitably handicapped'. Similarly, the author further asserts that for the non native speaker striving to achieve near native proficiency is merely 'wishful thinking' due to their linguistic disadvantage in vocabulary, oral fluency and pronunciation'(422). Filho (2002) observes that people with accents often linked to typically monolingual English speaking countries such as Britain, America and/or Australia are considered better speakers of English than English speakers from other nations –especially those from ESL countries. Similarly, although Jenkins (2003) highlights that there is no correlation between standard accents and Standard English; she contradicts herself by arguing that one of the solutions to the problem of pronunciation is cloning, where the non native English speaker models the pronunciation and accent of a native speaker in order to gain credibility.

These two writers present a common assumption in the field of TESOL: that the NNESTs' intend to come across as non-native speakers of the language desiring to be equated to their native counterparts especially in regards to accent and pronunciation. This is however not true. Makoni and Meinhof (2003) present an important argument about the '*Standard British'* accent and the way it is viewed particularly in Africa. They argue that there is "*the existence of a certain amount of schizophrenia in Africa in which Africans admire educated English, especially the learned style and tend to cultivate it , while avoiding speaking too well or with a standard accent"* (67). They note that this is a way of maintaining identification with their roots as well as trying to sound eloquent. Similarly in my experience of teaching the English language at two institutions of higher education in Rwanda, students have often cited accent as representative of an English teachers' competence in the language and ability to teach it well. Their assumption is that the better English teacher is the one with the '*foreign sounding'* accent for instance an American or British accent.

This further highlights the dilemma of the ESL African teacher who struggles to fit in and be accepted by either society. For ESL teachers, however, the issue of language competence is solely and unfairly determined by the accent with no consideration for the fact that the accent is heavily influenced by the dialects from the local languages in Africa or India. It is therefore inevitably deeply embedded in one's speech. Often traces of this

local/native accent will still be found in speech regardless of exposure and constant use of English although it does not interfere with intelligibility. Also, Jenkins (2000) noted that although some speakers second Language (L2) strived to acquire a standard British or American accent, the majority expressed the desire to preserve traces of their mother tongue in their speech so as to maintain a close connection with their culture. Therefore, the issue of the accent should be respected and not used as a standard for judgement of one's English proficiency.

Although numerous differences have been presented to show the differences between the two categories of teachers (Medgyes, 1994), the notion that the 'native English speaker' be re-established as the language expert, this emphasis should be put more on one's expertise rather than nationality or race (Rampton, 1990). Arva and Medgyes (2000) argue that doing things differently does not necessarily translate into being wrong. Rather, if one has acquired the necessary skills and is effective at/in what they do, they are as competent because '*teachers, regardless of whatever popular adages say, are made rather than born ... whether they are native or non-native'* (Phillipson, 1992b: 194).

The NESTs' role in the ESL context

Because the 'implicit goal in language teaching has often been to get as close to the native speaker as possible [and] recognizing the native speaker as having the only acceptable form of the language' the role of ESL teachers in these contexts is crucial in shattering these misconceptions about the English language (Lurda, 2005: 55). In order to ensure that both teachers and students are teaching and learning the language without inhibition about its nativeness, the English teacher must take into consideration certain aspects in and outside the English classroom.

Teachers should evaluate the hidden curricula and values being taught to their students (Canagarajah, 1999). An examination of textbooks in the English curricula should be carried out to denote items that imply superiority of one society over another and inevitably contribute to labels and complexes. Teachers should ensure that 'ESL textbooks and instructional materials ... reflect multiple perspectives inherent to a pluralistic society in order to engage students in a process of uncovering and confronting cultural biases' (Ndura, 2004: 143). In my experience teaching English in Rwanda I noted that a lot of content in the current teaching material available for Rwandan students is quite foreign and as such may prove to be a hindrance in understanding English within the context of their own culture. Examples of "*train stations, snow, bank holidays, etc*" are all contextually Western references and as such, may prove difficult to understand and/or appreciate as relevant examples by a significant number of Rwandan students that have not traveled to and/or lived in Europe or America**.** Canagarajah (1999: 87) adds that "the linguistic ideology of the textbook tends to reinforce dominance of a 'Standard English' by ignoring the existence of indigenous Englishes in the periphery". Teachers should therefore strive to ensure that they educate students about the varieties of English, so that they can embrace their own variety of English so as to eradicate stereotypes about the good English teacher being the native speaker or white teacher (Milambiling, 2000).

English teachers should also ensure that teaching methodology and textbooks are contextually appropriate and relevant according to students' needs (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 1994). Canagarajah (1999: 86) observes that often 'the situations represented [in English textbooks] such as commuting by plane , cooking with a microwave or shopping in department stores assume an urbanised western culture that is still largely alien to rural students and likely to clash with traditional values'. Teachers should ensure that teaching materials aside from textbooks represent a realistic view of the world rather than endorse stereotypes of one society being better than the other. Ndura (2004) asserts that the process of reflecting, addressing and transforming biases in textbooks and materials is a one of the means to enabling teachers to *'become more culturally responsive and to motivate their students to take charge ... and actively participate in the transformation of current unfavourable societal realities'* (p.150). Although limitations such as time, lack of funds and large classes might hinder a critical evaluation of teaching materials, an effort should be made for the sake of these students. This is because students' consciousness, identity and self perception are often predominantly shaped by their educational experiences (Canagarajah, 1999).

Conclusion

Although there have been efforts to abolish the 'native' and 'non native speaker' categorisations in reference to English language teachers around the world, implications are still being made that the *Native* English teacher is a better than non-native one (Arva & Medgyes, 2000; Braine, 2005; Davies, 2003;). Using references to relevant literature on this topic, I have presented major issues relating to the plight of balanced bilingual NNEST's particularly in regards to marginalisation by potential employers and students based on stereotypical attitudes about who is qualified to teach the English language; native or non native speaker. I have also discussed the role of NNESTs in ensuring the eradication of stereotypes in classrooms and with students. The need to empower and educate students on the varieties of English, the current status of English as an international language, as well as ensuring cultural appropriateness of materials and methodology within the language classrooms has been discussed.

Throughout this discussion what has become apparent is the need for NNESTs, and particularly ESL teachers, to receive educational training in their areas and contexts of the various standards and varieties of English so that they have a clear understanding of what authentic English is, especially when faced with marginalisation and discrimination in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). In addition professionals (administrators, educators, teachers) must also become more attuned towards this issue of discrimination of NNESTs, especially in the employment sector by establishing unambiguous hiring practices that stipulate inclusion and equality of all teachers regardless of whether they are '*native'* or '*non-native'* speakers of English (Holliday, 2005). This is so as to further enhance the development of English Language teaching across the globe. What is imperative is that all language teachers, regardless of their proficiency, *'get involved in furthering an internationalised perspective of [English language teaching] in which users of English are simply, more or less, accomplished communicators'* (Medgyes, 1992: 341).

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