

Who is a native speaker? A look at how students at an international university in Thailand make judgements on who is and who is not a native speaker of English

by A. Matthew Thomas Wilkinson

Introduction:

The title question may seem like a simple one, and to most people it probably is, but it is also a question which upon further thought becomes harder and harder to see a clear answer to. The more one thinks about it the more elusive a clear definition becomes. A question often asked that has similar issues might be, ‘Where are you from?’ which seems simple enough but can actually be very difficult to answer in a way that is honest whilst also satisfying the questioner. Using myself as an example I can say that I am from a particular town in England. But I wasn’t born there; my family is not ‘from’ there and for more than half of my life I haven’t lived there. So is it accurate or honest to say that that is where I am from? Conversely, though I *can* say with honesty that I am a native-speaker of English, that does not change the difficulties of the question. So why is it worth asking? And who does it affect? The ELT industry is a big business. ‘Within a few years, there could be around 2 billion people simultaneously learning English in the world’s schools and colleges

and as independent adults. Nearly a third of the world population will be trying to learn English at the same time.’ predicted Graddol a few years ago, and also ‘...the British Council estimate for the year 2000, in which between 750 million and 1 billion people were learning English’(Graddol 2006). The promotion of and infatuation with the native-speaker model has consequences for both teachers and learners. Promotion, because, as Phillipson states, ‘the native speaker concept has political and economic benefits for the countries from which particular languages originated.’ (Phillipson 1992). And infatuation which for example has spawned the term ‘English Fever’ in South Korea (Park 2009), and similar ‘fever’ in Thailand (Takahashi 2012). According to Kirkpatrick in *World Englishes: Implications for International Communication and English Language Teaching* (Kirkpatrick 2007), there are several reasons why what he calls the ‘exonormative native speaker model’ is chosen as a teaching model around the world. Firstly it has prestige and legitimacy, and more importantly perhaps it has been codified with grammars and dictionaries available for teachers and learners alike. Because it has been codified it can be tested against these norms. Also based on this norm are English Language Teaching (ELT) materials which are readily available and heavily promoted by the ELT industry in the US and UK. In fact ‘The English language teaching market is so important that it is common to find senior government ministers promoting it on behalf of their respective ELT

industries.’ (Kirkpatrick 2007). Furthermore, Education Ministries around the world are keen to be seen to be giving the best and to be upholding standards, and by choosing the native speaker model they be seen to do that. It can be taken that the reasons for the existence of this model, i.e. the fact that English is seen as the language of international communication at all, have many and complex reasons, historical, political, economic, social etc but to discuss them is beyond the scope of this paper. For details on the spread of English around the world see *English as a Global Language* (Crystal 2003).

So, given the influence and reach of this model, surely it is also worth asking what is meant by the term ‘native-speaker’, and if it can actually be defined. As used by MOEs, schools and language institutions it seems to quite clearly and inaccurately refer simply to citizens of certain countries. For example, in Thailand to qualify as a native speaker of English one simply has to be one of the following nationalities: American, British, Australian, Canadian, Irish, New Zealander and until recently South African. But of course the imagined and ideal native-speaker here will have certain characteristics beyond nationality that will even exclude citizens of those select countries. For example, it has been pointed out in discussing English language learning in Japan that ‘...native speakers of English that appear as teachers in the promotional materials are found to be nearly always white.’ (Piller, Takahashi and

Watanabe 2010). The same can certainly be said about Thailand. A quick look at the posters and adverts of the large English language schools in Bangkok all show the native English speaker as white (young and good-looking too). What this ideal (ideology?) does is, of course, to exclude native speakers who happen not to fit this image, i.e. native speakers of English who happen not to be white. So what appears, without going into it too much here, is that there is no escaping the connection between ideas of race and that of native speaker in the promotion of English and the learning of English. And as pointed out by Kubota & Lin, 'The silence in our field on topics about racialization and racism is peculiar given increased attention to them in other academic fields as well as the tremendous amount of racialized diversity manifested in TESOL.' (Kubota, 2006).

How are English language teachers affected by this? In a survey of non-native English teachers in Hong Kong about their perceptions of proficiency and competency, (Tang 1997) it was found that most believed that native English teachers were superior. Non-native English teachers, it was observed, were associated with accuracy rather than fluency, and many of the Non-native English teachers felt inadequate in their work having a fear of rejection by the learners. Another study in Canada (Amin 1997), looked at teachers' own perceptions of their students' ideal English language teacher. The main beliefs found were that some learners thought that only White

people can be native speakers of English and that only native speakers know 'real' or 'proper' English. Non-white teachers reported that they found themselves challenged by students and constructed as non-native speakers (even though they were Canadian), and therefore less able to teach the English that they want or need. He states in reference to English language courses in Canada, 'The discourse of these ESL programs was such that the majority of the students showed a decided preference for White teachers over non-White teachers.' (Amin 1997) He also says that there is a need for a clear definition of native and nonnative speaker and that it needs to be made clear that there is no intrinsic connection between race and ability in English.

So what is the clear definition? Is there one? In his book, 'Native Speaker: Myth and Reality' (Davies 2003), Davies discusses some of the possible definitions from a social and linguistic perspective based around concepts such as mother tongue, first language, dominant language and home language, all of which are flawed in one way or another and are discussed briefly below. He also states that, 'The position taken up in this book...is that it is possible but difficult for an adult second language learner to become a native speaker of the target language.' (Davies 2003) which would mean that the definition must be directly based on proficiency and also implies that a monolingual speaker may not even be a native speaker of the only

language they know! As Widdowson said when talking about native speakers and their relationship to so called standard English, 'In fact, come to think of it, not most native speakers, for the majority of those who are to the language born speak nonstandard English and have themselves to be instructed in the standard at school.' (Widdowson 1994) The point here is that being a 'native speaker' as the term in general is used, does not equate directly with proficiency or the imaginary model/norm that is usually promoted and aspired to. A further point here is that the idea of a standard English (or any language) is imaginary. But again this is a discussion beyond the scope of this paper. See *English with an Accent* (Lippi-Green 2012). Contrary to the position taken by Davies, Cook states, 'The indisputable element in the definition of native speaker is that a person is a native speaker of the language learnt first.' (Cook 1999), and that, 'Later-learnt languages can never be native languages, by definition', which means that learners cannot be turned into native speakers; it is an impossibility. Medgyes, who accepts the terms native and non-native as representing something real, agrees with this point, though with a distinct lack of social insight, saying 'The main reason why non-natives cannot turn into natives lies in the fact that they are, by their very nature, norm-dependent. Their use of English is but an imitation of some form of native use. Just as epigons never become genuine artists, non-native speakers can never be as creative and original as those whom they have learnt to

copy.’(Medgyes 1992) Apart from making nonnative English speakers sound like androids imitating human behavior, this ignores the reality of numerous local varieties of English particularly in outer circle countries (Kachru 1985) where for such varieties to exist there must be creativity and originality otherwise they would never differ from the so-called norm. The position taken by Cook then (and the assumption made by Medgyes) basically equates native speaker/native language with first language and follows Bloomfield’s use of the term when he wrote ‘The first language a human being learns to speak is his native language; he is a native speaker of this language.’ (Bloomfield 1933) So can native language and therefore native-speaker be defined as the first language used? This at first seems like a clear and easy definition, but real life tends not to obey easy definitions and questions arise. Does first language mean mother language? What if a child is raised by a nanny/primary caregiver who speaks a different language or dialect from that of the child’s real mother? Could we then say ‘primary caregiver tongue’? What if one language is partially learnt as a young child at home but then another language quickly takes over at school and amongst peers and becomes the dominant language? Then can we say that the native language should be defined as the dominant language? But how is this to be judged? How late in life can this happen and still take the dominant language to be the native language? What about a child with bi/multilingual parents, either both speaking more than

one language or each parent having different dominant languages?

Can a person have more than one first language and therefore be a native-speaker of more than one language? Another definition given '...the language or languages which have been acquired naturally during childhood' (Harmers and Blanc 1989), which clearly would allow a person to have more than one native language. One problem I see is that the concept of a native-speaker only fits in a world of monolingual people, whereas in reality many if not most people are bi/multilingual/dialectal. 'Some two-thirds of the children on earth grow up in a bilingual environment, and develop competence in it.' (Crystal 2003). Again, using myself as an example I can say that my mother tongue, first language, dominant language and home language are all the same, that is English. So I can say with confidence that I am a native-speaker of English, but I am at one end of a long spectrum. Towards the other end of the spectrum, I can give as an example a friend of mine, born to Chinese parents but who grew up in Thailand. Her mother tongue, first language and home language are all Chinese (Cantonese), but her dominant language is most definitely Thai. She is literate in Thai and English but not Chinese. So what would her native language be? Another friend of mine spoke German as a first language, Kiswahili as a mother tongue and English as a third but dominant language, all learnt in childhood. Same question.

Going back to Davies; what about using proficiency as the defining factor for being a native speaker rather than nationality or ideas of first/mother/dominant language? ‘Membership, as I see it, is largely a matter of self-ascription, not of something being given; it is in this sense that members decide for themselves.’ (Davies 2003). So, if you believe that you are a native-speaker, and you say that you are a native speaker then you are? This might work, but then why use the phrase ‘native speaker’ at all? Davies goes on to say ‘...those who claim native-speaker status then have a responsibility in terms of confidence and identity.’ But then, how fair is it to put the responsibility on the speaker when they may not fit the ethnic/cultural/racial ideal of a native-speaker of English and constantly find themselves positioned as nonnative-speakers by others? (Norton Peirce 1995) And if it really came down to confidence and identity how does proficiency fit into it? It is easy to imagine a person who is highly proficient but lacking in confidence and/or identity and vice versa. If the definition is to be based on proficiency then it is a redundant term since there is nothing ‘native’ about it. If it is based on first language/mother tongue there are flaws easily exposed by simple examples, and does not work in an increasingly connected multicultural world. And if it is based on something arbitrary such as nationality, then it becomes largely meaningless in today’s world of globalization and global love! See

Intercultural Communication: A Critical Introduction (Piller 2011)

for a look at intercultural romance.

Of the definitions in use now, one is that which is used in the ELT industry with little relation to language or teaching ability where English and its teachers have become a commodity to be sold (Piller, Takahashi and Watanabe 2010). The other is the social and linguistic definition which as we have seen does not give us anything clear-cut and easy to work with. And caught in between those two definitions is the English language teacher. My own position is that it is an outdated concept, neither real nor meaningful, and possibly harmful when used as a judgement of proficiency by employers. Yet the fact is still that the ELT industry has a definition based on nationality and arguably also based on race. But what seems, to the limited knowledge of this researcher, to be missing here is the voice of the learner. Governments and institutions will have their motives, linguists their informed views and opinions, the teachers' voice and sense of identity has been looked at (Amin 1997; Tang 1997), but what about the learners' view? How do they judge a native-speaker? The aim of this short and limited study, then, is to try to get a sense of how undergraduate students, all English language learners at an international university in Thailand, perceive and judge their English language teachers in terms of native speaker identity, whether or not race is a factor in these judgements and how do these judgements

compare to the promotional material used by the ELT industry in Thailand, an expanding circle country (Kachru 1985). This study sets out therefore to answer the following research questions:

1. How do students at an international university in Thailand make judgements on who is and who is not a native speaker of English?
2. How much of a factor is race in making these judgements?
3. Which countries do they consider *native speakers* of English to come from?

One further issue that is highly relevant to the question of what and who is a native speaker is that of the advantages and disadvantages of the 'native speaker' vs. 'non-native speaker' English language teacher. But once again this is beyond this paper but for a discussion on the issue see *World Englishes* (Kirkpatrick 2007).

Methodology

A quantitative approach using questionnaires in English was initially considered but dropped after it became clear that a significant number of the respondents did not understand the questions or simply didn't bother reading them, a new issue for this inexperienced researcher. This appeared to be the case even though the researcher was present as the questionnaires were completed and some explanation was given as to their purpose. After that it was decided that a more qualitative approach using interviews would provide

more reliable data and could also be used to give a second line of site *if* compared to analysis of the questionnaire. Due to time restraints and not wishing to get into complicated statistical procedures, the data collected from the questionnaire were not analysed in any detail, *but* shallow comparisons with the answers to the research questions obtained by the interviews could not be ignored. This was achieved by discarding completed questionnaires that were judged to be of no value, such as when boxes were checked in a straight line down the questionnaire, even though the researcher was fully aware of the arbitrary and subjective nature of this process. But the researcher wanted to keep the results of the questionnaires in mind because of the concept of *triangulation* where ‘By combining several lines of sight, researchers obtain a better, more substantive picture of reality; a richer, more complete array of symbols and theoretical concepts; and a means of verifying many of these elements.’ (Berg, 2012) Forty eight completed questionnaires were considered valid. The interviews were conducted in English over a period of about three weeks, some at the end of a class and others in a coffee shop. Each interview lasted between four and ten minutes. All the participants were undergraduate students and all except for one were (and are) studying English. They were chosen for their ability to communicate sufficiently well to express opinions and ideas in English, but apart from that there were no criteria used and the selection was random. Random, that is, in the sense that no particular method was used and

interviews were conducted on the basis of convenience for both the researcher and participants. This could have been directly after a class or arranged in advance for a particular time. Table 1 illustrates the participants' profiles.

Table 1. Participants' profile.

Name*	Nationality	Age	Sex
Fern	Thai	20	Female
Ploy	Thai	19	Female
Edward	Chinese	21	Male
Nina	Chinese	20	Female
Golf	Thai	20	Male
Sooji	Korean	23	Female

*names have been changed

The questions used in the interview were as follows: 1) What does 'native speaker' mean to you? 2) In your opinion what does a typical native speaker of English look like? 3) People from which countries do you consider to be native speakers of English? 4) If a teacher who was X walked into your class and told you in English that they were from Y, would you consider them to be a native speaker of English? X here indicates a variable ethnic identifier, e.g. White/Black/Asian, and Y indicates a variable country. So a question might be about a White teacher from France, or an Asian teacher from Britain etc.

The exact phrasing of each of the questions was modified depending on the interpretation or level of understanding shown by the participant. For the content analysis of the data an interpretative approach was followed with the interviews transcribed into written text. (Berg et al., 2012).

Findings

When it came to defining what it means to be a native speaker of any language, the participants were split equally between those who in their own minds based the meaning of the term on proficiency and those who based it on nationality. For example, Ploy stated 'Native speaker means local people who live in that country,' clearly associating native speaker status with nationality. Whereas Sooji described it as 'Who can speak without thinking and who can read anything just by looking at it. Yep, that's my definition of native speaker.' Sooji also went on to agree that a person could be a native speaker of more than one language. Not too surprisingly those who defined a native speaker based on nationality were also more reluctant to regard an Asian identity as being a native speaker of English regardless of language ability. For example, Nina, who was on the nationality side of the debate, when asked what a typical native speaker of English looked like said, 'Black and White, yep.' But when asked if an Asian person could be a native speaker of English, the answer was an emphatic 'no!' On the other hand, of the

two participants most ready to regard the possibility of a native speaker of English having an Asian identity both were of the view that native speaker status could be defined by proficiency in that language. So, looking at the first research question: How do students at an international university in Thailand make judgements on who is and who is not a native speaker of English? It appears divided between those who judge it on nationality and those who judge it on proficiency in English. Obviously, a study with a higher number of participants would more clearly show how widespread each view is, but from this small scale study it seems an even divide.

Five of the six participants associated Whiteness with native English speaker identity. Nina, as mentioned earlier, also included Black identity in her image of a native speaker of English. Only Sooji saw race as irrelevant, saying, 'Ahhh it's very very various so like I can't, I can't even like I don't know, so even Asians they look like Asians but they like have native speaker.' But even she then went on to say that, 'Yeah more credible, more creditability on black people I guess.' when compared to Asians. One interesting, but perhaps not so surprising, response on what a typical native speaker of English looks like came from Fern who said, 'Handsome, white skin and have a beautiful nose, and in a blue eyes.' So how much of a factor is race in making these judgements? Interpretation of the responses given suggests that race is most strongly a factor when it comes to

excluding those with an Asian identity from being viewed as native speakers of English. For example, Edward regarded an English speaking Norwegian as having native speaker status but an Asian person from Britain as not. Native English speaking status, it seems, is very much associated with being white although according to all of the participants being black can count too. Having said that three of the participants, Ploy, Fern and Golf, did not regard English-speaking Europeans other than British as being native speakers of English. Somewhat contradicting the Asian exclusion view was that two of them, Sooji and Golf, also regarded Filipinos as having native English speaking status. Both of them were participants who defined native speaker based on proficiency. Coming to the final research question: Which countries do they consider *native speakers* of English to come from? The answers were quite straight forward and consistent. The first answer was always America and Britain. Sooji also included Canada and 'maybe Philippines'. Golf also included the Philippines, and Nina came up with New Zealand after further thought. No other countries were mentioned unless brought up as examples by the researcher.

Conclusion

One question that emerged from the finding is: why is it so hard for an Asian to be seen as a native speaker of English? The first consideration needs to be what the participants in this study meant

with the use of the term *Asian*, something that was missed by this researcher. But the assumption is that they mean people from East Asia and are not including those from the Middle East or the Indian subcontinent. So, given that the participants are from the countries Thailand, China and Korea, it is interpreted that when using the term *Asian* they are referring to people *like themselves*. And since none of them consider themselves to be native speakers of English but see themselves as learners (all but one are still active learners), they therefore view a native speaker of English as someone *unlike* them, i.e. not Asian. It is possible then, in the view of this researcher, a case of them subconsciously thinking: I am Asian. I am not a native speaker of English. Therefore all Asians are not native speakers of English. But further investigation and a theoretical framework would be needed to justify this view. Another question that comes up is why is it that only America and Britain are viewed as native English speaking countries when governments (Thailand's for example) and the ELT industry also recognize Australia, New Zealand and Canada? A possible answer might be the influence of the ELT industry's promotional material that makes heavy use of the British and American flags. A recent example would be a large poster advertisement that showed the Shanghai skyline with the red and white lines of the Union Jack (the UK flag) in the foreground going across blue water, and standing on it the figure of a man making the lines look like pathways.

Other things to take into consideration with this study include the possibility of the researchers' own identity affecting the participants' answers. This is something, though, that is impossible to avoid regardless of the nature of the researchers' identity. Also, as mentioned earlier, superficial analysis of the questionnaires could not be erased from the memory of the researcher and those results did concur with the findings from the interviews. The biggest issue, though, in judging the validity of the findings is the limited number of interviews that were conducted and analysed. It would be easy and justifiable to say that it is not representative, but then again no study with the same research questions would be truly representative unless *every* student in the university was interviewed. So it can be seen as just a glimpse of what students think and should not be taken as anything more than that.

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