Expatiating on native speaker
and
non-native speaker constructs

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Abstract

In this paper, the author has endeavoured to clarify and elaborate on insights into being native and non-native speakers particularly in the area of English language teaching. The focus is, however, on ideas and beliefs that underlie the assumptions of what makes one a 'native' or a 'non-native'. The paper ends with an implication that the disparity behind nativeness and non-nativeness persists in teaching and learning a foreign language. Hence, further cross-cultural and contextual investigation appears useful in this realm of studies.

Introduction

Among second language (L2) teachers in an English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, according to Medgyes (1996), two major cohorts of teachers can be classified: native English speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs). This suggests that every language teacher is either a NEST or a non-NEST. This discrepancy in L2 teachers is congruent with a number of research studies and literature which normally address ESL teachers on the basis of their native and non-native status (e.g. Davies, 2003; Braine, 1999; Liu, 1999, McLaughlin, 2000, and many others). Therefore, the native and non-native speaker constructs will be discussed and critically examined in this paper.

Defining native and non-native speaker constructs

Native speaker constructs

According to Davies (1991), the construct 'native speaker' has at least three different meanings in theoretical discussion with regards to knowledge and capacity. Firstly, it is used to refer to a speaker of one's own idiolect. Secondly, it refers to a speaker of an uncodified dialect, and thirdly, the construct represents part of a group adhering to a codified norm in a standard language. He further points out that it is possible to be a native speaker of more than one language, even though it is not common.

The characteristics of a native speaker have also been identified by Davies (2003) along with Stern (1983), Crystal (1985), and Richards et al. (1985), all of whom suggest the following major points found in the qualities of the native speaker (NS):

· the NS acquires the first language (L1) of which he or she is a native speaker in childhood;
· the NS has intuitions in terms of acceptability and productiveness about his or her own language competence;

- the NS has intuitions about those features which are mutually intelligible by others whom they share the same language with;
- the NS has a specific capacity to produce proficient spontaneous discourse, exhibiting a wide range of communicative competence;
- the NS has a specific capacity to write creatively at all levels of written discourse; and
- the NS has a specific capacity to interpret and translate into the L1 of which s/he is a native speaker.
- the NS shows identification with a language community (This is an additional point mentioned by Johnson and Johnson, 1998 and Kramsch, 1995)

Apparently, it is debatable that in reality some native speakers are far from fluent in speech. Native speakers are not necessarily aware of their knowledge in a formal sense or only a small percentage of native speakers are characterised with creativity, such as poets or rap singers. Therefore, these characteristics of a native speaker are variable and not a necessary part of the definition of "native speaker" since the lack of any one of them would not disqualify a person from being a native speaker (Cook, 1999).

A rather different, challenging viewpoint about a native speaker is proposed by Kramsch (1995). While acknowledging that one has to be recognised as a native speaker by the relevant speech community, it is remarked that being a native speaker is the result of particular education. According to her,

> 'education bestows the privilege of being not only a native speaker but a middle-class mainstream native speaker, for native speakers have internalised the values, beliefs, myths of the dominant ideologies propagated by schools and other educational institutions' (ibid:1995).

This idea is confirmed by Widdowson (1994), explaining that a native speaker is someone who speaks the right variety of the native language. In fact, Widdowson affirms that a majority of those who are born to the language speak a non-standard native language and have themselves to be instructed in the standard at school. In this way, native speakers only refer to those who identify themselves with a codified norm in a standard language. More to this, Amin (2001) argues that a native speaker is not only someone with the right accent but also with the right skin color. Her point can be illustrated with the use of a term 'invisible native speaker'. The term has a connotation to refer to a native speaker who obviously speaks the right accent of the native language but is stereotyped by others as a non-native speaker because of his/her appearance.

The definition and characteristics of a native speaker can be more fundamentally challenged. For example, how would one identify children acquiring an L1 such as English in childhood who may partly or completely lose this knowledge once they move to live in a country such as here, Thailand where a different language is used. In this case, the question is which language the children are native speakers of: English or Thai or both? Another example is the case of children who learn two languages simultaneously from

birth. Do they have two first languages (Davies, 1991) or arguably only one dominant first language? Is having two first languages the same as being a monolingual native speaker of either language? The author holds that all these critical concerns imply subtle and diverse ambiguities, which are in need of further investigation.

Rather than being objective and affirmative about it, Davies (2003) sees the term "native speaker" as an ideal associated with the myth, while acknowledging that the term serves as a model associated with reality, which deserves consideration. According to him, several major observations regarding the native speaker can be identified. Firstly, from the psychological perspective every human is a native speaker of his or her own individual language. In this sense, the definition is echoed in modern sources such as *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (McArthur, 1992) and the corpus-based *Collins COBUILD English Dictionary* (1995). A similar proposition is supported by Cook (1999) as well as Nayar (1994) and Lippi-Green (1997).

Secondly, native speakers differ from one another with regard to accent and syntax as neither do all native speakers have the same accent, nor are they all equally competent in the native language. Nayar (ibid.) and Lippi-Green (ibid.) are in agreement with Davies that native speaker's accent does not seem to be an absolute norm because each native speaker has a distinctive accent. There is also evidence from Carter and McCarthy (2003), who find that native speakers are different in terms of their communicative competence in spoken and written discourse, some of which may even contain linguistically inaccurate grammatical forms. The third observation is that while one native speaker's grammar may be different from another's, there is intelligibility. Fourthly, it is possible that a non-native speaker can become an L2 native speaker, although it is much more difficult for adults to do so than children. Nevertheless, Felix (1987) makes an observation that non-native speaker adults usually fail to become L2 native speakers and even if they could they cannot meet the biodevelopmental definition of 'native speaker'.

Non-native speaker constructs

As for the construct of the non-native speaker, Davies (1991:167) plainly concludes that 'to be a native speaker means not being a non-native speaker'. A non-native speaker is defined as 'someone who is not regarded by him/herself or by native speakers as a native speaker'. Therefore, a distinction between a native speaker and a non-native speaker is obvious in this regard. According to Moussu (2002), a non-native speaker is a person who, at one point of his/her life, had to consciously learn an academically accepted form of another language.

However, the construct 'non-native speaker' is defined differently by Medgyes (1994), who states that there are two points to consider. The first point concerns motivation, which further divides non-native speakers into two categories. The first category consists of individuals who see English as an instrument to achieve limited personal or professional goals, such as passing an examination or engaging in simple conversations with foreigners. The second category includes people for whom English

is a matter of utmost importance, such as immigrants or those who use English as a major medium of their profession. This accords with Gardner and Lambert's (1972) distinction between 'instrumental' and 'integrative' motivation.

The second point, according to Medgyes (ibid.), concerns individuals' own desire not to qualify themselves as 'native speakers', even though they might have strong integrative motivation. This is because the wish to attain native-like proficiency in the L2 usually comes with the attachment to their own L1 identity. Thus, individuals in this case often keep some distance between themselves and the L2 community. They continue to view themselves as non-native speakers regardless of their native-like accent and grammar. Davies (1991) adds that it is indeed native speakers of L2 that tend to be more stringent about sociolinguistic violations when non-native speakers become more native-like in grammar and accent. Davies' point seems to support Medgyes's claim.

Conclusion

Based on the preceding segments, it is notable that the constructs 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker' are highly problematic, particularly in the field of English language teaching. In fact, the 'native speaker' and 'non-native speaker' division or dichotomy has been a cause for concern for years and is one of the most complex and elusive areas in applied linguistics (Medgyes, 1994; Rampton, 1990; Gill and Rebrova, 2001; Braine, 1999; Jenkins, 2000; Newfields, 2000; Higgins, 2003). More interestingly, Medgyes (1994) and Gill and Rebrova (2001) report numerous attempts made in recent years to suggest that the constructs are no longer valid. For instance, Swales (1993) argues that it makes no sense to differentiate between the native speaker and the non-native speaker since the terms 'native' and 'non-native' are of little value and extremely awkward.

Given such a controversy of the constructs, the dichotomy between the native and non-native speaker continuingly needs additional research and analysis in various contexts as well as cultures.

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Language Glossary

Cohort: a group of people who share a common feature or aspect of behavior
Construct: a notion or belief that is based on various pieces of evidence which are not always true
Dichotomy: the separation that exists between two groups or things opposite to each other
Expatiate on: write or speak in detail about a topic
Intelligibility: the ability to understand something effortlessly

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