

TEFL, Native Speakers and Accents

By A. Rognvald Scott

For this edition of *Galaxy*, instead of offering some comments on the political outlook in Thailand, as I had at first intended, I've decided to switch to a TEFL – related topic as political analysis is both controversial and perhaps touches too many sensitivities to be entirely suitable for publication in the English Department's Journal.

Another reason for making the switch from Thai politics to TEFL is that the teaching of English as a foreign language is a big part of Assumption university's cultural mission in Thailand. Certainly AU, to its credit, has been a pioneer in this field, and remains a key player. Moreover, various aspects of TEFL probably give rise to more discussion than any other academic topic in Assumption University. However, some of the discussion is vitiated by concealed prejudices of various kinds, notably where accents, grammar and pronunciation are concerned.

As I am neither a grammarian nor a specialist in linguistics, I shall confine my remarks in this short piece to two non-technical aspects of TEFL. These are — first, the role and possible contribution of native English speakers to second language acquisition and second, the degree of importance to be attached to accents and pronunciation in the teaching and learning process.

But, before discussing the relative merits or, put another way, the strengths and weaknesses of native and non-native speakers of English as teachers of English, let us put the discussion in context by having an authoritative opinion on what might be called the 'State of English question', and in this area what better guide could we have than Dr. Robert Burchfield, the late chief editor of all the Oxford Dictionaries?

Writing a brief foreword to the 'Oxford Guide to the English Language' in 1983, Dr. Burchfield remarked, "although we now live in a world strewn with reference books and grammars, there has never been a time when people needed guidance about the English language more than they do at present". In writing this, Dr. Burchfield was referring to the way in which the prescriptivism of 18th century grammarians has been challenged by the descriptivism of 20th century linguistic scholars like Ferdinand De Saussure and Noam Chomsky.

Discussing the views of Chomsky on grammar and language is beyond the scope of this short piece and also, to tell the truth, beyond my competence. I am simply not sufficiently well read in the subject. Instead I shall finish this section with another brief quotation that I think gives an indication of Burchfield's erudition and the breadth and flexibility of his approach to the study of language.

He quotes the early 19th century English writer and essayist William Cobbett (author of “Rural Rides”) as writing in a letter to his son, James “a sound mind in a sound body is the greatest gift that God can give to man, but mere soundness of mind is possessed by millions; it is an ordinary possession. The pride beyond measure is knowledge “but” in the immense field of this kind of knowledge, innumerable are the paths, and grammar is the gate of entrance to them all”.

Dr. Burchfield adds, ‘To grammar I would add lexicography and insofar as they are separable from both, the broad principles of pronunciation.’

I would not dissent from the opinions on this matter expressed by either William Cobbett or Dr. Burchfield.

I turn now to consider the role of native speakers – whether they should be accorded priority of esteem in this debate – and secondly whether their opinions should prevail when accents and pronunciation are being considered, though I confess that I do not consider this question to be of special importance in the TEFL debate. But first, how does one define a native speaker? My experience of evaluating the English Department’s placement tests over the past few years has persuaded me that this is a trickier question than I had at first assumed. The expression ‘native speaker’ can be defined in a number of ways and these will tend to vary according to the criteria being applied.

These in my view should include a sound knowledge of English grammar and syntax – I hesitate to write “thorough knowledge”, - a large vocabulary and a good grasp of English idiom and colloquial usage varying to some extent with the country of birth and residence of the native speaker. For the moment, I leave aside the question of accents and pronunciation which, though not of overwhelming importance, clearly cannot be ignored in the TEFL debate. Indeed, the very expression ‘native speaker’, highlights the importance of verbal communication.

Using the criteria outlined above, I should define a native English speaker as a person born to English speaking parents in an English speaking country such as the United Kingdom, the USA or Australia and educated mainly in that country. However, as I have learned through placement tests, where education is concerned, endless permutations are possible and these can certainly affect the quality of the native speaker’s English as well as his or her fluency in conversation.

I firmly believe, though some may dissent from the proposition, that a native speaker fulfilling the criteria I have outlined above will have certain advantages as a communicator or a teacher of English. He or she will probably have a better feel for English idiom and the nuances of colloquial speech than a person born and educated in say Bombay or Brazil. But I think that this appreciation of or feeling for the nuances of English is much more important when dealing with English literature than in the business writing which is the main preoccupation of ABAC.

I am of course aware that many well-qualified and dedicated teachers who happen not to be native speakers as defined above resent any suggestion that native speakers are inherently superior and should be accorded preference when promotions or appointments are being considered. I understand their concerns though I don't think the situation is too bad at Assumption University where most senior appointments are not held by native speakers of English. In fact, the converse is true.

However, I don't think that it is unreasonable to suggest that an educated native speaker, suitably motivated, is likely to have a firmer grasp of and feeling for English idiom or the nuances of colloquial speech than someone born and educated in a non-native environment. Would not the same be true if Russian, French or Thai were the languages under scrutiny?

Nevertheless, in a teaching context I believe that an appreciation of and feeling for the nuances of both formal English and colloquial speech, as opposed to basic grammar and syntax, is much more important when explaining or commenting on English literature especially classic texts than when interpreting the workaday prose used in business and technical writings. In according non-native speakers parity of esteem in this domain I am of course assuming that the non-native speakers use standard English and communicate effectively in the classroom. These conditions are, unfortunately, not always met.

Developing this point further, I am reminded of a famous exchange between Richard Nixon, then US vice-president and the distinguished Indian diplomat and scholar, Dr. Krishna Menon. When Mr. Nixon suggested that Dr. Menon did not properly understand some of the points that he (Nixon) was making because of an imperfect grasp of colloquial English, Dr. Menon retorted, 'Mr. Vice President, the difference between you and me in so far as concerns the understanding and use of English is that, whereas you simply picked up English as an American youth, I had to study and learn the language'.

There is a good deal of truth in this observation. Many non-native speakers are more concerned about — indeed sometimes obsessed by — the finer points of grammar, spelling and pronunciation than are native speakers who take them for granted. As the writer Anthony Burgess once remarked “It is one thing to use language; it is quite another to understand how it works.”

To reinforce my argument in favour of according parity of esteem to educated native and non-native speakers in a TEFL context, I shall summon one more witness for the prosecution. In the mid twentieth century a Danish scholar, Dr. O’Jespersen was one of the best known authorities on English grammar and author of several books on the subject including a nine volume ‘History of English Grammar on Historical Principles’. I believe that it would be absurd to suggest that an ‘average’ native speaker teaching English in Bangkok or Bogota would be a better guide to the complexities of English grammar and syntax than Dr. O’Jespersen. I am of course speaking of discussion about ideas and concepts and not simply the reserving of hotel rooms or ordering of meals in restaurants. Nor have I any idea whether Dr. Jespersen was an effective performer in the classroom or lecture hall. Many fine scholars are ineffective in this sphere. But I don’t think that this is a major issue in the TEFL debate.

Finally, I shall offer a few brief comments on the question of accents and pronunciation in the context of TEFL. Accents are still a minor obsession in the UK because of their association with social status and class. Vocabulary is another element in this debate as witness to the famous ‘U or non-U’ controversy that dominated cocktail party discussion in London and the South East in the nineteen fifties. This debate gives rise to a number of amusing articles by writers such as John Betjeman, Nancy Mitferol and Evelyn Waugh. Their articles are still worth reading by non-English readers wanting to get an insight into aspects of English culture associated with speech and social class, still a very English pre-occupation, it must be said.

In their chapter on pronunciation, authors of the ‘Oxford Guide to English Usage’ write, ‘The treatment here is based upon Received Pronunciation (RP), namely ‘the pronunciation of that variety of British English widely considered to be least regional, being originally that used by educated speakers in southern England’. This is not to suggest that other varieties are inferior; rather, RP is here taken as a neutral national standard, just as it is in its use in broadcasting or in the teaching of English as a foreign language.

As noted above, there is nothing inferior about regional accents but I think that in a TEFL

context RP is to be preferred wherever possible if only to avoid confusion among students being taught by teachers with different regional accents. Like many listeners, I think that the quality of English speech on the BBC has declined since the very strict standards imposed by Lord Reith, the first director general were relaxed. Past 1945 during Reith's time and for many years, afterwards no announcers with regional accents were to be heard reading natural news bulletins. However, in past 1945 multi-cultural England, Reith's standards came to be considered too rigid and, a grave sin, class biased. This may be true, but I still consider today's 'relaxed' RP as used by the BBC as the best model for those who aspire to speak and pronounce English correctly.

A. Rognvald Scott joined ABAC in 1991

Education: MA (Hons) History, Glasgow University

BA (Hons) Philosophy, Politics, Economics, Oxford University

MA (Hons), Oxford University