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Nativism, the Native Speaker Construct, and Minority Immigrant Women Teachers of English as a Second Language

■ In this article, the author argues that the “native speaker of English” concept is a linguistic manifestation of nativist discourses that construct visible minority immigrant women in First-World countries as being nonnative to the nation state and, thus, as being nonnative speakers of English. This study is based on the experiences of eight minority immigrant women who have taught English as a second language (ESL) to adults in Toronto, Canada. The article explores the teachers’ encounters with native speaker ideologies and recounts how they negotiated challenges in the classroom. Using data from the study, the author raises questions about the validity of the native speaker model that is used in ESL programs and suggests that the native-nonnative speaker dichotomy be dismantled, and the native-speaker norm be reconceptualized.

There was a sharp knock on the door of my university office. A graduate student whom I often see at departmental seminars and parties popped his head inside the door and said, “Do you know any native speakers [of English]?” He had a sheet of paper with approximately 20 sentences and phrases, and he wanted a native speaker to go over them. I offered to look at them. He reluctantly handed me the sheet, and I did not find it difficult to give him the “correct” answers. Indeed, the problems and questions were so simple that most teachers of English as a second language (ESL), particularly at the higher levels where there is emphasis on colloquialisms and where you are supposed to have a “feel” for the language, could easily have answered them. I pointed out a few phrases that I would not use and others that I considered to be acceptable. He thanked me and as he was leaving said, “Would a native speaker agree with you on these suggestions?”

I do not know what this Ph.D. candidate did with my input, but I suspect that he did not use it. This seemingly innocuous incident was one of

many that left me first, puzzled about my “nonnative speaker” status and second, wondering what the significance of the native speaker is. The first question that comes to mind when I think of such incidents is: What linguistic knowledge does a native speaker of English have that someone who has studied English for many years does not or cannot have? In other words, what is the definitive distinction that this student was trying to voice? And why did the student assume that I am not a native speaker of English? Is it because of my race—that I am a visible minority woman? Is it also because I have a Pakistani accent?¹

The “native speaker of English” is such a powerful construct, one so embedded in myth, that it is daunting to attempt to disentangle fact from fable. As Nayar (1994) puts it: “Generations of applied linguistic mythmaking in the indubitable superiority and the impregnable infallibility of the ‘native speaker’ has created stereotypes that die hard” (p. 4). This mythmaking, I suggest, is not only about language competence but is deeply embedded in discourses of racism and colonialism that inform both individual and institutional understandings and evaluations of speakers of nonnative Englishes. The more recent critical literature says as much. For instance, Kachru (1997) considers the native speaker to be a linguistic colonial construct. Pennycook (1998) reaches a similar conclusion, claiming that the native speaker is yet another legacy of colonialism. And Paikeday (1985), commenting on who is seen as a native speaker, says that when people recruit “native speakers” of English, the term appears to be a codeword for White Anglo-Saxon protestants.

I take the position in this paper that the native speaker construct is embedded in the larger discourses of nativism² that position visible minority immigrant women as nonnative to the predominantly English-speaking nations of the First World (e.g., to Canada or the U.S.) and that nativist discourses are being mobilized through the native speaker concept. I further argue that immigrant women from the Third World,³ or from what Kachru (1992) terms Outer Circle and Expanding Circle countries—i.e., countries where English has a history of institutionalized functions and where it has foreign language standing, respectively—are considered nonnative to the predominantly English-speaking countries of the First World, or Inner Circle. By virtue of their race and birth status, these immigrant women are therefore considered nonnative speakers of English and outsiders to Inner Circle societies. To borrow Brah’s (1996) words in the context of England, racial minority immigrants are seen as living “in” Canada or the U.S., but are not seen as being “of” these countries.

This paper is based on a study that investigates the experiences of visible minority immigrant women teachers of ESL in Canada (Amin, 2000). Highlighting data from 6 of the 8 participants in the study, in this paper I explore their encounters with the discourses of the native speaker and of nativism. I first describe my study, after which I detail its theoretical underpinnings. I then describe the challenges faced by the minority ESL teachers interviewed and how they negotiate these challenges in the class-

room. Finally, I look at the implications of my research for English Language Teaching (ELT).

The Study

From 1998 to 1999 I conducted interviews with eight minority immigrant women who had taught or were teaching ESL to adult immigrants in Toronto, Canada in government-financed language programs known commonly as “Settlement ESL.” The purpose of my research was to investigate how nativism, in particular the concept of the native speaker, is manifested in the context of ESL and how minority immigrant women teachers of ESL negotiate this linguistic manifestation of cultural nativism (see Amin, 2000 for details of the study).

A few facts about the racial makeup of Canada are helpful here in order to situate the study. In the decade after World War II, one-half of all Canada’s immigrants came from the United Kingdom. During the late 1960s, a series of reforms in immigration policy was introduced that resulted in more immigrants coming from countries other than the U.K. Hence, in 1994, only two percent of Canada’s immigrants came from the U.K. (“All the King’s Horses,” 1999). Toronto attracts a large number of the immigrants who come to Canada—approximately 48% of Toronto’s population are immigrants, and by year 2001 foreign-born residents will comprise the majority of the Toronto population (City of Toronto, 1998). The overwhelming majority (86%) of teachers in the province’s Settlement ESL courses are women, and 35% of them are nonnative speakers (Power Analysis, 1998). The definition of native speaker and nonnative speaker of English used in the Power Analysis study was based on “the first language” (L1) that the instructor learned (B. Power, personal communication, August 25, 1999). Such statistics and judgments about native and nonnative speakers are problematic. The statistics do establish, however, that (a) the local teaching force is multiracial and multicultural, and (b) many ESL teachers are likely to be confronted with nativist discourses.

My participants were visible minority women who grew up in the Third World, immigrated to Canada as adults, and had taught or were teaching Settlement ESL to adult immigrants. These women had backgrounds similar to mine in that English was a major language in their lives in their countries of origin and continued to be a major language in their lives in Canada. I began my interviews with two minority teachers whom I identified with the help of the Toronto and Ontario branches of the professional organization, Teachers of English as a Second Language. The rest were chosen through the “snowball sampling technique” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 70); that is, I asked the first two teachers interviewed to recommend others. The participants were randomly selected, and data collection consisted of open-ended semi-structured interviews. The participants were: Arun from India, Dina from Surinam, Fayza from Egypt, Iffat from India and Pakistan, Jane from China, Patsy from Kenya, Tasneem from Pakistan, and Violet from Jamaica.⁴

My research questions were the following:

1. How is nativism, in particular the concept of the native speaker, manifested in the context of ESL?
2. How do visible minority immigrant women teachers of ESL negotiate nativism and the native speaker construct?

Theoretical Background

My study draws on three notions. The first notion is that a racial minority woman's English is heard as the English of a nonnative speaker, of a foreigner. Fiction writer Bharati Mukherjee, who is originally from India and now lives in the U.S., supports this notion by describing her experience as a linguistic and racial Other in her (1985) short story "Hindus." In this story, Leela, the protagonist, expresses well the idea that mouthing English perfectly does not automatically put the speaker in the native speaker category.

Second, this study relies on the notion that the native speaker concept is embedded in nativist discourses that position only Inner Circle speakers of English as having legitimate claims to belonging to their country and of having English as their native language. According to Davies (1991), the first recorded use of native speaker is the following definition by Bloomfield (1933): "The first language a human being learns to speak is his native language, he is a native speaker of this language" (p. 43). Such a definition and other definitions in modern sources (see Amin, 2000, for a discussion on this topic) emphasize conditions and qualities such as (a) birth, parentage, childhood, and (b) intuition. These qualities appear to be embedded in the original meaning of native as "natural." The emphasis in these widely accepted definitions is on the intuition of native speakers who, it is suggested, cannot help knowing what they do about English. This intuition is seen as being tied to the fact that their "mother tongue," or first language, is English.

Third, this study draws on the concept that an immigrant woman's race is a marker of being an immigrant woman and of being nonnative to Inner Circle societies. I argue that this experience of Otherness is reproduced in the ESL classroom through the imagining of the native speaker as White. This concept influences the teaching, classroom materials, and relations between the teacher and learners. The race of the idealized native speaker is spelled out by Leung, Harris, and Rampton (1997), who, building on Rampton's earlier (1990) research, argue that there is an "abstracted notion of an idealised native speaker of English from which ethnic and linguistic minorities are automatically excluded" (p. 546). Leung, Harris, and Rampton appear to be saying that even visible minorities who are born and have grown up in the First World are not seen as native speakers. Another marker of being nonnative is having an accent that is different from the norm of the ESL classroom. I argue that accents, like race, are socially organized, are a linguistic manifestation of nativism, and constitute a new and effective form of racism. Brutt-Griffler and Samimy (1999) argue that "national origin and accent" (p. 416) are crucial characteristics that are

socially held to represent those of the native speaker. Drawing on my earlier work (Amin, 1994), I would go one step further and say that a native speaker is imagined as having a White accent, one that is associated with Inner Circle countries such as Britain, the U.S.A, and Canada.

Findings

The challenges faced by nonnative women teachers have been well documented in the recent literature (see Amin, 1999; Kamhi-Stein, 1999; and Thomas, 1999 for a discussion on the topic), and hence I will take only a brief look at the main difficulties reported by my participants. In a Canadian setting, I see all these challenges as stemming from the construction of minority immigrant women as being non-Canadian and the privileging of the native speaker of “Canadian English” by Settlement ESL programs in Canada.

Challenges Faced by Minority Women Teachers

My participants indicated that some of their students initially reacted so negatively to having a non-White teacher that they decided not to return. Fayza, who, as a new immigrant was formerly a student in an ESL class, recognized the investments immigrants have in learning English from a teacher whom they consider to be a Canadian. As I have argued elsewhere (see Amin, 1997), there appears to be a strong connection between the attitudes of the students—many of them new immigrants—to nonnative teachers and their investments in learning English. What are some of these investments? As Rockhill and Tomic (1995) point out, new immigrants who are learning English are defined as “other,” as “culturally and linguistically inferior” (p. xi); the discourse of ESL is such that it promises liberation once one has acquired English, and hence new Canadians are invested in what they term “Canadian English.” To appreciate what “Canadian” English symbolizes to new Canadians, I turn to Peirce’s (1993) study in which she examines the complex interrelationships between power, identity, and language learning of immigrant women. Peirce reveals how much immigrant women want to “speak like them [the dominant group]” (p. 1) to negotiate their social identity. Peirce argues that English should be seen not primarily for its instrumental value, as Ng (1990) does, but as constitutive of and constituted by social identity. It is clear that ESL learners have a great investment in learning Canadian English (see Amin, 1997), while minority immigrant women are positioned as being non-Canadian and hence unable to teach Canadian English.

Nativist discourses that position minority teachers as outside the nation and as nonnative to Canadian English are best exemplified by Iffat’s narrative. Iffat’s many degrees in English could not compensate her students for what they saw: a visible minority woman and the only non-White teacher in the school. Iffat named one ethnic group after another who “were very hard on me.” One such group was from a neighbouring country to Pakistan.

Nuzhat: Like what did they say?

Iffat: “Oh, you’re Pakistani.” And they, they’d sort of imply that, “Look here, we are in Canada and I’m being taught English by a Pakistani.”

But in the multiracial class that she habitually taught, it was not only students of color who were “hard” on her.

Iffat: East Europeans would say, “Ohhh. So you’re from Pakistan.” They’d just sit there and make me feel sort of bad that, you know.

Nuzhat: So your, your problem with students, over the next twenty or thirty years, did the situation with the students remain the same?

Iffat: Yes, it did remain the same. Because there were all these new immigrants coming in. And every time there would be a revolution somewhere, we would have a whole bunch of new students.

The students at this school were new immigrants, and as Iffat taught the beginners, her students were often those who were very recent arrivals. She says that as the program was only three months long, she could not tell if the students’ idea of an ideal ESL teacher changed with time—whether, in fact, this thinking was reinforced or lessened.

Another manifestation of nativism is that minority teachers are perceived as *learners* of English. The interconnected discourses of native speaker, L1, and mother tongue emphasize birth, heredity, and innateness of linguistic ability (see Christophersen, 1988), and hence nonnative teachers can be disadvantaged by being seen as having acquired English rather than having English as part of their inheritance from a mother or father. The recurrent theme in Arun’s narrative is that she is considered to be a language learner.

Arun: Students ask me a lot of questions: “Where did you learn English?” “You’ve learned English well.” “How many years did it take you to learn English?” “How long have you been in Canada?” These are the first reactions, because right away when they find out that I’m not from Canada, [they think] I might be lacking in some way. It might be accent or proper Canadian English.

Nuzhat: But what if the teacher was a visible minority woman who was born in Canada or came here as a child?

Arun: It would still be the same. The initial response would be, “Oh, she who herself has learned, how can she teach us?”

Arun is making three points. First, students want a Canadian teacher. Second, students think of Arun as a person who has learned the language and therefore cannot teach it, thus reflecting one of the strongest tenets of English language teaching (ELT), that the ideal teacher is one who has been immersed in English from birth. The third point follows from the second—that if you are not born in an English-only environment, you cannot ever learn English well enough to teach it and definitely will never speak it as well as a native speaker. There is a growing body of literature that shows that a

person who has been a language learner can be a better teacher in certain situations than a native speaker or someone who has not formally learned English (see Tang, 1997; Widdowson, 1994). However, it appears that the Inner Circle has been successful in promoting the mystique of the elusive native speaker among new immigrants in ESL programs in Canada. In this context it is worth citing Davies (1991) who points out that there is *no* definition of the native speaker; the only definition seems to be negative, that is, the “native speaker would be someone who is *not* a learner” (p. x). To me, the significance of this negative definition is that “ESL learner” is construed as a static, unchanging identity, and there is no possibility of moving from the identity of ESL learner to that of native speaker. Hence Arun’s students think that she cannot be a *teacher* of English.

Nonnative Identities as a Source of Empowerment

The women’s experiences in ESL indicate that discourses of colonialism continue to adhere to English in Canada and interlock with racism, sexism, imperialism, and the women’s Third World status to discredit their claim of being valid ESL teachers. The narratives suggest that the teachers are aware of the nativist discourses that position them as Other, but also strongly point to the following findings: (a) The participants feel that they are effective teachers despite initial nonacceptance by their students and colleagues and despite being constantly judged against the native speaker norm; and (b) they build effective pedagogies on their ascribed nonnative status and, in fact, they are more effective in the classroom when they build their pedagogies on their nonnative identities, rather than when they try to follow the native speaker norm. I now look at some of the successful classroom strategies in which the teachers foreground their differences.

Build community. One such pedagogical strategy common to the teachers is that they build community with their students on the basis of their commonalities and thus provide the social conditions identified by Peirce (1993) as conducive to language learning. Jane says this of her bilingual Mandarin-English class:

Jane: Bilingual, they are from my culture, so they perceive me as a bridge between the two worlds. You feel you are highly appreciated. You bring the two worlds together.

Jane feels successful in the bilingual class primarily because her students and she share a common language, culture, and ethnicity.

Tang’s (1997) study of Cantonese-speaking teachers teaching English in Hong Kong offers insight into the strengths of bilingual teachers who share the L1 of their students, and hence it is relevant to bilingual ESL programs in any country. The teachers in Tang’s study reported that having a common mother tongue is a useful instructional tool in teacher-student interaction. Some respondents reported also that their experiences as ESL learners gave them a privileged understanding of the problems and weaknesses of their students. Tang adds that nonnative teachers can empathize with their learners

and thus attend to their errors, especially those that are due to transfer from their L1. Tang's findings concur with Widdowson's (1994) view that nonnative teachers can be more effective than native teachers in certain situations.

In the context of Canada, a study of Settlement ESL programs for adult immigrants in Ontario shows that 14% of ESL teachers are fluent in "Chinese," and that 23% of ESL students in Ontario first learned to speak "Chinese" (Power Analysis, 1998). Assuming that many of these adults were at some time in bilingual ESL programs, it could be argued that Jane's feelings of success are probably common among teachers of bilingual ESL programs for ethnic Chinese students.

Like Jane, Dina works hard at fostering community with her students. As she is multilingual and familiar with a number of cultures, she uses these qualities to establish an environment conducive to language learning:

Dina: They loved [being in my class] because they could converse with me in their own language, so if there was a problem, they would come to me, and I could understand their culture. It was as if I was an ally to them, rather than an enemy.

She describes a particular class where her students were Iranians, ethnic Chinese people from Hong Kong, and Koreans, and where she felt particularly successful:

Dina: And since I knew their culture and religion and customs, it was, "Oh, yes, you understand what I'm talking about. How important Ramadan is, how important Eid and Nauruz are."

One of Dina's successful pedagogical strategies for creating community with her students is to show her familiarity and acceptance of their institutions—many of which are not validated by White Canada. Jane says that she is successful in the bilingual class because she shares a common language, culture, and ethnicity with her students. While Dina does not share the languages of all her students, she and her students have many commonalities.

Like Jane and Dina, Fayza forges community with her students, but she builds on the shared experience of being nonnative and immigrant. She articulates the pressures felt by some new immigrants to assimilate:

Fayza: The students, they come here, they are in a hurry, they want to be recognized and integrated, and part of this society, and that's why they want to destroy their identity completely, their values, and they want to identify with this native completely. Some of them even imitate their way of talking, the way they dress, even if it doesn't suit them. But they *want* to be Canadian.

It appears, then, that as Fayza makes connections between language and culture, she recognizes also the self-hatred that her students suffer from, a self-hatred she recognizes because she experienced it as a new immigrant. She tells her students that as a new immigrant and as an ESL student she too wanted to erase her roots, and she draws on her experience to caution them that "people respect you more when you respect yourself."

Fayza: But they [students] have to know also that they have to keep their identity. When you come to Canada, it doesn't mean that you have to be Canadian, that you have to have everything like a born Canadian. Like you have to want his values, his traditions, his language, everything. You have to keep your identity. Identity is very important. You have also to realize that your roots and traditions and values are important.

Disrupt native speaker myths of birth, intuition. The teachers build their pedagogies on an experience that is associated with being nonnative speakers—the experience of having been ESL learners—and this experience provides them with a privileged understanding of the problems and weaknesses their students face in learning English (see Tang, 1997). Tasneem's experience of Otherness in a number of sites has made her mindful of the negative messages that her students are receiving about their social identities as ESL learners. She describes how she is an agent in her students' empowerment:

Tasneem: Some of my Chinese students say that English is very difficult, and I tell them: You can learn it. I learned it. I wasn't born speaking English. My mother doesn't speak English. We learned English in school.

Tasneem is stressing two related points: First, that English is not her mother tongue, and second, that English can be learned, thus challenging the discourse that you have to be born in an English-speaking family and that English has to be your mother's or father's L1 in order to know English well. She is telling her students: Don't give up. I did it, and so can you—much-needed words of encouragement for adult students who often feel that learning English well is an impossible goal. Clearly, Tasneem has embraced a non-native position as one from which she can effectively negotiate her teaching.

Use anti-racist materials. Another way these teachers demythologize the native speaker is with the materials that they bring into the classroom. Since immigrants have to face the stereotype of what is a valid and acceptable accent, and as the Settlement ESL classroom uses native speaker accents as the norm, Dina focuses on disrupting the stereotype of what accent a teacher or a person of authority should have. In place of commercial audiotapes that use what I've termed "White" accents, she often makes her own tapes that include a variety of voices, including her own. In this way, she disrupts her students' thinking that their minority teacher's accent is different from the accents they hear on the commercial tapes and thus perceive as authoritative.

According to Jane, her students' understanding of a Canadian accent is: "The English they hear on TV, the English they hear around them they recognize as Canadian." Like Dina, Jane self-consciously uses tapes with a variety of accents, thus encouraging her students to rethink their understanding of a Canadian accent to include those voices and those accents that they do not hear on mainstream television and radio.

The experience of being a linguistic and racial Other, both inside and outside ESL, has also sensitized Arun to interracial and interethnic tensions

among her students, and she addresses these tensions in a nonthreatening way. Among the materials that she has found effective in addressing and diffusing these tensions is a video called *Eye of the Beholder* (Reynolds, 1955), in which all four witnesses to a death describe the incident differently. Arun uses this video to discuss how human beings turn our prejudiced perceptions into “facts.” To explain this process, she gives the hypothetical example of a woman having four or five negative experiences with a few Vietnamese people, leading her to attribute these negative qualities to all Vietnamese people.

Nuzhat: Are you doing this only to address students’ racism against other students or is this also your way of dealing with what’s happening to you [that is, not being accepted as a good English teacher]?

Arun: Exactly. It serves my purpose too...[Prejudices] have roots...There are historical reasons for dislikes [of a particular ethnic group]. After these exercises, my students learn how to respect everybody. That’s what I want them to do before learning English—to have respect for everyone in the class.

In sum, Dina, Jane, and Arun draw on materials that challenge the belief that the White native speaker is the only valid ESL teacher.

Prepare effective lessons. It was not a surprise when all the participants said that they believe teachers should have extensive training, more than a two- to three-month course for Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). It, therefore, did not surprise me that they had all spent a great amount of time upgrading their skills in teacher training institutes. All eight teachers talked about how hard they work to produce good, effective lessons. This message came through most poignantly and clearly in Fayza’s interview, for she explained *why* she had to work so hard:

Fayza: I was so conscientious. When you become a teacher, and it’s not your native language, after all, it’s your second language so you become so conscientious, and you want to do your best to compensate or to make up for that or to make them feel that they have achieved their goal somehow. You don’t want to disappoint your students, right? Then you get a good feedback sometime.

Nuzhat: You seem like a very hard working and conscientious person. Would you have done the same [gone to such pains] if you were teaching, say, Arabic? Or was it because you were teaching English and you felt that somehow you had to?

Fayza: Yes, I would have done probably the same if I were teaching Arabic. But in a more relaxed [way]. No doubt about it, it’s a challenge, teaching English, because you have to know more about the culture. No matter how long you have learned the language, no matter how long you have been using the language, still you have to be aware of all aspects of the language. But with your own native language, sometimes you take it for granted.

I asked Fayza if her students ever asked the supervisor for a native speaker teacher.

Fayza: Yes. True. But eventually not so many of them do that. These are adult students, and they are looking for a good teacher to help them with their language difficulties. They soon realize that it's not just the colour of the skin [that they should go by]. Is she a good teacher? That is the bottom line. Your reputation gets around. If you are a dedicated teacher and you are doing a good job, then the word gets around and then there will be no problem.

The many hours of hard work that Fayza put in to overcome her perceived deficiency helped to make her a popular and successful teacher. Although the belief that teachers have to compensate for not being native speakers might be problematic, it is common among nonnative teachers (see, for example, Kamhi-Stein, 1999) because of the unrealistic—written or unwritten—goal of many ESL and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs worldwide that students should learn to speak like native speakers (see Kachru, 1990a; Sridhar, 1994).

A Pedagogy of Empowerment

The participants in my study have opened up possibilities for their students, for nonnative teachers, and for all those involved in ESL by showing that although native speakers are privileged by our profession, nonnative speakers can also lay valid claim to full competency in English. They also show that good pedagogy is not the province of the native speaker but is dependent on learning the craft or skill of teaching ESL. These are big steps toward the empowerment of nonnative speakers, both students and teachers, for, as Widdowson (1994) has pointed out, the association of the native speaker with ownership of English and good pedagogy is a dominant discourse of ELT.

What do the participants' pedagogical strategies imply for decolonizing the ESL classroom? Here I turn to Simon (1992), who distinguishes between "pedagogy" and "teaching" (p. 56). According to Simon, "When we teach, we are always implicated in the construction of a horizon of possibility for ourselves, our students, and our communities...To propose a pedagogy is to propose a political vision" (pp. 56-57). Simon emphasizes that we teachers need to concern ourselves with the enhancement of human possibility whereby we encourage our students to "envisage versions of a world that is 'not yet'—in order to be able to alter the grounds upon which life is lived" (p. 57). By disrupting dominant stereotypes of who can claim full competency in English and by showing that nonnative speakers are effective teachers, my participants are engaging in a transformative critique of their own lives and of the lives of their adult learners. These teachers' nonnative pedagogies also have implications for ELT.

Implications for English Language Teaching

As noted above, the data indicate that, to varying degrees, the teachers do not use the native speaker as their model; rather, they build effective pedagogies based on their difference and on their ascribed nonnative speaker status. But while the teachers try to decolonize the classroom, the extent to which they can transform ESL is limited by the confines of their profession. Although the native speaker norm is being questioned by linguists (e.g., Braine, 1999; Nayar, 1994), many ESL and EFL programs worldwide continue to have as a goal that students learn to speak like native speakers (Kachru, 1990a; Sridhar, 1994). In this section I will look at the ramifications of my study for our profession. First I will address the responsibilities of professional organizations in ELT and then suggest a reassessment of teacher training programs that would result in a revision of settlement ESL programs.

Responsibilities of the Professional Organizations

One term that is “overdue for compulsory retirement” in linguistics, according to Christophersen (1988) is “native” as used in phrases like “native language” and “native speaker” (p. 15). Christophersen suggests also redefining the terms “first language” and “mother tongue” on the basis that they are misleading and confusing. A person’s mother tongue may or may not be their mother’s tongue, nor is a person’s L1 always that which they learned first, because first can mean either the language the person learned first or the language that is first in importance. Cheshire (1991) and Ferguson (1992) have made similar arguments.

The narratives of the participants in my study indicate that such a reconceptualization of these concepts is indeed long overdue because the native speaker model is not a pedagogically sound principle in all contexts. For example, in many ESL programs worldwide the native speaker norm is frequently used when teaching higher level classes, the rationale being that students want to learn idiomatically appropriate language and to appreciate the cultural connotations of the language (see Phillipson, 1992). But according to Phillipson (1992), teachers who are nonnative speakers can acquire this competence through teacher training.

My position in this paper has been that the native speaker-nonnative speaker division is not solely based on proficiency and that many nonnative speakers are fully proficient in English. In addition, the native speaker model divides the profession according to a caste system and should therefore be eliminated (Kachru, 1990b; Pennycook, 1992; Phillipson, 1992). Organizations like the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL), Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), and TESOL affiliates, should therefore actively dismantle the native speaker-nonnative speaker dichotomy.

Such an initiative, as Widdowson (1994) has recommended, should involve an inquiry into the craft of teaching ESL and EFL, since, as the participants have shown, teaching English well is not a racial or biological quality but a craft, a skill that has to be learned. Phillipson (1992) makes a similar

point when he asserts that teachers are made rather than born and that “the untrained or unqualified native speaker is potentially a menace” (p. 195). This inquiry should address the interlinked issue of World Englishes. English has evolved away from its original base of Inner Circle societies and has become indigenized in a number of postcolonial countries. Historically, native speakers have decided whether a variety of English is valid. However, as Kachru (1992) and Sridhar and Sridhar (1992), among others, have argued, the rules used to decide on the validity of a particular variety of nonnative English are culturally and linguistically biased. Kachru (1992) adds that native speakers of mother English define any deviation from mother English in the indigenized varieties of English as not a difference but an error, for the norm that they use is that of English as used in native contexts.

What then can TESOL or other professional organizations do to validate the different varieties of English that exist outside Inner Circle countries? Quirk (1990) has dismissed any attempts at acceptance of these new varieties of English as “liberation linguistics.” His stand continues to be that standard British English should be the norm internationally. Kachru (1991) considers Quirk’s insistence to be unrealistic and misguided as it ignores the reality of World Englishes. Therefore, Kachru suggests a dialogue on the issue of international standardization. Such a dialogue is much needed now so that ESL and EFL programs worldwide can have a clearer direction in terms of which variety of English is the best model for a particular context.

Implications for Teacher Preparation

Kamhi-Stein (1999) notes that the messages of what a nonnative teacher cannot do stand in the way of nonnative speakers realizing their full potential, causing them to limit their career choices. Some of her teacher-trainees tell her that since they speak what they call “a deficient variety of English,’ they are qualified only to play the role of assistants of native English-speaking teachers” (p. 149). One of the consequences of this international hegemony of the native speaker is that nonnative speakers may see themselves as speakers of indigenized varieties of English and hence self-impose limits on their aspirations. As the discourses of the native speaker appear to be particularly disempowering for new teachers, I suggest that a curriculum that attempts to overcome these potentially disempowering discourses in teacher education programs is a meaningful first step towards dismantling the native-nonnative speaker dichotomy.

I now make suggestions for training new teachers, both native speakers and nonnative speakers, that will encourage them to explore new models and new pedagogies. I need to point out that the participants in my study are not new to this profession, that as teacher-trainees and as new teachers they might have used the native speaker model because it is the model actively promoted by TESOL programs, and that they have had to create and develop their own nonnative pedagogies in order to be effective teachers. Although I have termed their pedagogies “nonnative,” I wish to emphasize that both

native and nonnative teachers can learn from these pedagogies as they aim to eliminate the native-nonnative speaker dichotomy.

Sanaoui's (1997) *Directory of ESL Teacher Preparation Programs in Ontario* outlines the curriculum of programs in Ontario, and it is clear that by and large they focus narrowly on second language acquisition, teaching methods, and linguistics, without placing these fields in their sociopolitical context. More recently, some of the TESL programs in the U.S. have begun to address sociopolitical issues (Tollefson, 1995). However, there appears to be little acknowledgment of the existence, much less validity, of the international varieties of English, nor is there questioning of concepts such as first language, mother tongue, and native speaker. Thus, in many ways TESL programs in both Canada and the U.S. are helping to maintain the status quo. My proposal encourages trainees not to privilege the native speaker given that (a) the native speaker construct does not have a sound linguistic basis (and hence a pedagogy based on this norm is not always effective), and (b) the native speaker model is a way of "Othering" those seen as nonnative to English and nonnative to the nation. Rather than representing effective practices, pedagogies that make the native speaker the norm are promoting an unequal division between White First World teachers and teachers who come from the rest of the world. This non-linguistic underpinning of the native speaker construct has to be made transparent in TESL programs so that both native and nonnative teachers can make informed choices about what and how to teach.

I further suggest that the discourse of "empowerment"—through the acquisition of a Canadian, British, or American accent—is problematic. Lippi-Green (1997) argues that it is not possible for adults to eliminate their accent, and that even if adult immigrants could change their accents, the intersection of race, gender, class, and Third World status would be factors in their continuing disempowerment. Goldstein (1999) therefore questions the value of emphasizing a certain accent and pronunciation in ESL. In addition, such accent-reduction discourses of empowerment for students are disempowering for their nonnative teachers who may have one of the stigmatized accents that students are being encouraged to unlearn in order to succeed. Hence, both good pedagogy and social justice demand that TESL programs in Canada, the U.S., and elsewhere rethink this emphasis on native speaker accents.

I have so far addressed the need for all teacher trainees to question the native speaker model and explore new pedagogies. Now I will look at how TESL programs can equip the nonnative trainees for the special challenges that they will face in this profession. Kamhi-Stein (1999) makes a strong case for integrating instruction on issues related to nonnative speakers in TESL preparation programs. She further argues that such programs should allow future teachers to develop an understanding of their assets, beliefs, and values, and should also promote improvement of the teacher-trainees' competencies. In such an approach, the teacher preparation curriculum provides teacher-trainees with many opportunities to examine their nonnative speaker status in relation to theories of language acquisition, methodology,

and curriculum design. It also allows them to examine the cultural and social factors affecting second language development. Such a curriculum would be a meaningful attempt to counter discourses in ELT that promote the notion that the native speaker is the best model.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the native speaker is a linguistic manifestation of nativist discourses that position visible minority immigrant women as being nonnative to Canada or the U.S. and thus, as being nonnative speakers of English. I have also argued that native speakers are imagined as having Inner Circle accents, and that accents, like race, are socially organized, are a linguistic manifestation of nativism, and constitute a new and effective form of racism. I have indicated that minority teachers are aware of their positioning as nonnative, as the Other of ESL, and that they often draw on their experience of otherness to build successful pedagogies and to disrupt native speaker mythologies. I have then looked at some of the implications of my study for the teaching of English as a second or foreign language worldwide; more specifically I have recommended that professional organizations should actively work towards dismantling the native-nonnative speaker dichotomy and reconceptualizing the native speaker norm. I have also recommended that teacher education programs make transparent the nonlinguistic underpinnings of the native speaker construct so that both native and nonnative teachers can make informed pedagogical choices.

I conclude on an optimistic note. While the pedagogies employed by the participants in the study were developed in the context of Settlement ESL programs in Toronto, the teachers' narratives of resisting native speaker and nativist discourses and of setting up a counter-discursive paradigm in their ESL classrooms foreground strategies that can be employed by nonnative teachers in any classroom situation. These narratives tell a larger tale than ESL: By challenging the notion that the native speaker of English is the only valid teacher of English, the teachers are not only decolonizing ESL and decolonizing English, but they are also decolonizing our collective imagination.

Author

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Endnotes

- ¹ There is no one Pakistani accent. Accents in Pakistan, as in Canada, are on a continuum. I am referring to how my accent indicates that I did not grow up in Canada and the implications of this fact.
- ² “Nativism” refers to the belief that the national culture is embodied in certain groups of people who were born in that country. It further refers to the belief that these native-born individuals are native speakers and that one born outside that country to parents speaking another language cannot attain native-speaker status.
- ³ I do not use the term “Third World” unproblematically. Said (1994) has pointed out that the binary divisions of Third World-First World signify dominated and dominant. My use of these binaries in this article is an attempt to make transparent the continuing power inequalities between the two spheres that make it possible for the First World to produce and maintain such dichotomies as native-nonnative speaker. In addition, I am thus indicating that discourses of nativism continue to construct non-White immigrant women living in Canada as Third World inhabitants, signaled by the status of nonnative speaker that is ascribed to them.
- ⁴ Participants granted me permission to use data from their interviews in this study. I changed their names to protect their identities.

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