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Reflecting on Native Speaker Privilege

The issues surrounding native speakers (NSs) and nonnative speakers (NNSs) as teachers (NESTs and NNESTs, respectively) in the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) are a current topic of interest. In many contexts, the native speaker of English is viewed as the model teacher, thus putting the NEST into a position of privilege and the NNEST into one of prejudice. Recent scholarship has attempted to address these issues (Mahboob, 2010; Medgyes, 1994; Phillipson, 1992b). This paper will draw from some of this research as well as provide insights into the privileges enjoyed by NESTs in contrast to the discrimination faced by NNESTs. It will then discuss various practical ways that might help to mitigate the inequity between NESTs and NNESTs.

As a graduate student in TESOL who has taught English in ESL and EFL contexts, I have found one issue in the field to be particularly troubling—that of the discrimination of nonnative English speakers in TESOL (NNESTs) and of the privilege enjoyed by the teachers of English who are native speakers (NESTs). Throughout my MA TESOL program, I have been forced to examine the privilege that I experience as a white, native speaker of English from the US and how it has made my teacher training and graduate student development easier. Upon recognition of this, I am not only able, but have a responsibility, to generate awareness and act with those who are discriminated against. This article will enumerate the privileges I have encountered as well as examine various ways that might help to promote equality between NESTs and NNESTs.

Problematic Terminology

The term “native speaker” (NS) is a rather difficult one, as it is not easily defined (Arva & Medgyes, 2000). Most would agree that an NS knows the language or which he or she is an NS of, but even this is not so clear. Many believe that what it means to *know* a language consists

of not only knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary, but also cultural and social knowledge (Kramsch, 1997). Being an NS requires not only knowledge of the language, culture, and society, but it can also, in some cases, be contingent upon both being accepted by the group that created the NS/NNS distinction and also identifying with the group (Kramsch, 1997). Beyond knowledge of the language and acceptance in the group, the variety of English spoken also contributes to one's status as an NS. In today's global economy, having a standard English is widely discussed and debated. Some believe that there should not be a standard (Widdowson, 1994), while many others believe it is necessary in order to prevent chaos within the language. It leads one to question whether an NS has to speak a certain variety of English, or if he or she can speak any of the varieties of English?

The growth of English has led to various circles of English (Kachru, 1992), which complicates the traditional definition of an NS. Most think of NSs of English to be from countries such as the US, the United Kingdom, or Australia, which constitute the inner-circle varieties of English. Unfortunately, many are unaware that there are two other circles, which can arguably have just as valid NSs of English. There is the outer circle, where English is not the primary language but rather serves as a lingua franca, such as in India or Singapore. The last circle, the expanding circle, includes many other countries that use English for specific functions, such as business English (China, Korea, Russia, Japan, etc.). With these varieties of English evident, it becomes increasingly challenging to decide who is and who is not a native speaker and what the standard should be.

Student Ideas and Preferences

When one presupposes that inner-circle varieties of English are the only legitimate varieties, it devalues the outer-circle and expanding-circle varieties, thus making inner-circle varieties and their speakers the ideal (Higgins, 2003). This is the model from which English language learners learn about not only the language, but also information about the culture and society of inner-circle countries. While many do not realize that English is spoken in places such as India and Singapore, for example the students in Japan in Matsuda's (2003) study, learning about these outer-circle varieties did not change the students' idea of what English should sound like. Matsuda (2003) notes that although students learned about the outer-circle varieties, they still preferred American and British varieties and described them as "pure" and "authentic" (p. 123). There is a perceived superiority of native speakers of these dominant varieties, and the other varieties are undesired (Reis, 2012).

NESTs and NNESTs Working Together

In recent years, many have begun to challenge the NS ideal. This reexamining of the standard has opened the issue for debate and has inspired many studies on the difference between NEST and NNEST (Ma, 2012). Medgyes (1994) goes so far as to say that they are “two different species.” They have both different language proficiencies and behaviors, yet they can be equally good in their own ways (Arva & Medgyes, 2000). There has been much evidence to debunk the myth that native speakers are better teachers of English than nonnative speakers. In fact, Phillipson (1992a) coined the term “native speaker fallacy,” which argues that a native speaker does not necessarily equate to a qualified English language professional. Phillipson (1992b) also argues that teachers are made, not born, regardless of “whether they are natives or non-natives” (p. 14).

While many push for collaboration between NESTs and NNESTs so that they may learn from each other and improve their teaching practices, some argue against it. Reis (2009) argues that this collaboration might have negative effects, such as essentializing the two groups. Rather, we should drift away from this dichotomy and instead seek to view all teachers as unique individuals. While it is encouraging to see in recent scholarship a push toward equality, discrimination against NNSs and privilege for NSs is still evident today in the preference for NS teachers, especially abroad. For instance, I was able to get a teaching job in France quite easily because I was an NS, and there are many others with whom I have come into contact who were given the same preference because of their status as NSs.

Unearned and Invisible Privileges

The privileges I have encountered as a native speaker from an inner-circle country have only recently become apparent to me. An important note is that these privileges are often unearned, meaning a person is born into these situations. Individuals cannot control where they are born, what language they speak as they grow up, what religion or lack thereof they will be brought up in, what race they are, what their sexual identity is, and so forth. Those who are part of the “norm,” or the dominant group, tend to be unaware of these sorts of privileges that they have always accepted without question, and these privileges undoubtedly make daily life much easier for those included in the dominant group. For example, McIntosh (1988) gives several instances of the effects of her white privilege and the impact it has on her daily life, from being confident that her neighbors will like her, to knowing that she can curse, chew with her mouth open, or be late without its reflecting on her race. These advantages make up what Mc-

Intosh calls her “invisible knapsack,” which is full of privileges that she had to “unpack” and examine to see how she has benefited from them. As I reflected on my own “knapsack” of privileges, and as I considered my prior experience of teaching in an EFL context, as well as the issues I encountered in my graduate student development, I noted four unearned privileges that many NESTs have, each discussed below:

1. Ease in obtaining a teaching job based on name and appearance;
2. Confidence from intuition;
3. Credibility that may be undeserved; and
4. Freedom to be fun and casual in my teaching.

Privilege 1: Preferred Surname and Appearance

In today’s society, there is a global demand for English. Tatar and Yildiz (2010) state that the demand for English has created a competitive market for English schools. As a result, these English schools might exploit the misconception that native speakers are better language teachers by hiring NESTs and advertising the presence of NESTs at their institutions.

I got my first job as an English language teacher shortly after college without much difficulty. When searching for jobs, I noticed that most job postings simply required that I hold a BA and be a native speaker. Desperate for a job and unaware of the NEST/NNEST issue in the field, I applied to as many jobs as I could and was eventually accepted to be a teaching assistant in France. With only a few hours of training, I was thrust into the French classroom to act as an authority on English. Throughout my stay, I was surprised to find that my English-teaching coworkers—not native speakers from an inner-circle country like me—were more educated on the language than I, and I learned about “my” language from these NNESTs.

While there is a demand for native speakers, even those who are not native speakers might be hired if their names sound Western and look the part (Tatar & Yildiz, 2010). Similarly, native speakers might not be hired if they do not have Western names or look Western. I have a Western-sounding name and I am Caucasian. This preference based on race is prevalent in our field, and it can often be quite explicit as there is a tendency in expanding-circle countries to equate *white* with *native English speaker*. Thus, oftentimes, a person of color might be discriminated against, even if he or she is a native speaker of an inner-circle variety of English (Kubota & Lin, 2006).

Privilege 2: Confidence From Intuition

Kramersch (1997) notes that those born in a country such as the US have the privilege of using “grammatical intuitions” that nonnative speakers (NNSs) do not have. A NEST may simply respond to a question by his or her students with “Well, that’s the way it is,” while a NNEST must reply with solid evidence to satisfy the student. Reis (2012) also remarks that the NNEST in his study used a corpus tool as a way to “offset” the disadvantage of being a NNS. Additionally, this teacher states that he was not confident enough to use his intuition to respond to student inquiries. Rather, he had to provide evidence for his decisions, and he asserts that “only native speakers can (or have the right to) resort to intuition” (p. 41). An NS does not have to back up an answer but may just use his or her previous knowledge of speaking the language. Consequently, an NNS must use a reliable source to satisfy the question and remain trusted by the students, while an NS can answer a student’s question by saying that it just “sounds right.” In my early teaching experience, I experienced this situation frequently. I did not have to know, nor do I still have to know, every rule. But because I am a native speaker, my students do not question my intuition, and they tend to be satisfied with my answers.

Privilege 3: Undeserved Credibility

NSs not only have the privilege of using their intuition when answering student questions, but they also possess the privilege of being confident that others will trust their knowledge. In Tatar and Yildiz’s (2010) study, NNEST teachers in Turkey are fearful that students will question the English knowledge of their Turkish teachers. They state that “NNESTs start the game behind” (p. 119). According to this study, NNESTs think that they have something to prove, being seen initially as less credible. This perceived lack of credibility can come from either the students’ or other coworkers’ preconceptions. Liang (2009) describes the lack of confidence he felt as an NNS in the TESOL field by stating that he faced a good deal of discrimination in his education and in the hiring processes as a teacher. He ultimately realized that he must prove himself, leading him to a constant fear of inadequacy. Wu (2005) also shares her lack of confidence in her experience as an NNEST. She was worried that students would question her professionalism, but she was surprised to find through class surveys that few questioned her professionalism and rather, respected her. It is interesting to note, on the other hand, that students generally have a positive attitude toward NNS English teachers, especially at the tertiary level, because these teachers must be more competent English teachers (Cheung & Braine, 2007). However, the pervasive-

ness of the desire for native English-speaker teachers continues, and it rarely gives NSs a cause for worry as it does for NNSs. As an NEST, I am privileged to never have felt that students or coworkers did not trust my knowledge of the language, and I have never experienced the feeling of inadequacy to teach English.

Privilege 4: Freedom to Teach in a Fun and Casual Way

In a study on differences between NESTs and NNESTs in Hungary, Arva and Medgyes (2000) point out that the NESTs “could afford to be innovative, flexible and casual, as opposed to non-NESTs, who had to apply more middle-of-the-road, consistent and demanding teaching strategies in awareness of certain educational constraints and their students’ needs” (p. 364). In my experience, I have the freedom to teach a class for three hours, doing nothing but communicative activities and conversation, and no one would question my teaching. Conversely, the NNESTs in Hungary—and I venture to say that this happens in many ESL contexts in the US as well—experience the pressure to follow a more rigid plan that is focused on grammar and vocabulary.

Formulating a Response

Upon reflecting on my experience and recognizing these four privileges, I have been compelled to act. This duty is predicated on the idea of reflective teaching and critical pedagogy. A reflective teacher, according to Zeichner and Liston (2011), has a duty to have an active role in reform and leadership in education—to be a colearner and contributor to the field. Thus, an ESL educator may not remain simply a cog in the machine, but must work toward eliminating discrimination against NNESTs. Friere (1968/1970) also advocated for action. He argued for those in power to help those without privilege to come out from under the oppressive powers. In this case, the oppressed would refer to those who are not part of the dominant group—the NNESTs—who are discriminated against and thought of as inferior to NESTs by hiring organizations, students, and even themselves. The duty for the oppressors, or those in the dominant group—the NESTs—according to Friere, is to think *with* the oppressed, and not *for* them, and to not take away the words from the oppressed or to impose one’s own words upon them. Vandrick (2009) also encourages this kind of thinking to be practiced by the oppressor classes, or those with privilege. “Those who have any kind of privilege (even if they lack privilege in another area) have an obligation to advocate for those with less privilege in that area” he states (p. 106). This advocacy consists of speaking *with*, speaking *out for*, and speaking *about* in order to allow social change

to take place—the change, of course, being toward equality between NESTs and NNESTs.

There are four significant ways that TESOL educators can be effectors of positive change toward equality in the NEST/NNEST issue:

1. Implementing World Englishes into the curriculum;
2. Pursuing education and professional development for both NESTs and NNESTs;
3. Avoiding monolingualism as foreign language instructors; and
4. Encouraging reflection and open conversation.

Response 1: The Implementation of World Englishes

The first of these steps is based on implementation of World Englishes in the curriculum, which includes not only leadership involvement in curriculum decisions, but also the responsibility of individual teachers to implement World Englishes in their lesson plans and syllabi. *Implementing World Englishes* means a shift from an emphasis on inner-circle Englishes from the US and the United Kingdom to a perspective in favor of all varieties of English. Mahboob (2010) states that World Englishes and NNEST research are closely related in that they both argue that there is no one standard of English. For the English language teacher, Matsuda (2003) suggests that this can be accomplished through introducing speakers of these different varieties of English by using textbooks, movies, listening activities, and articles that contain characters and dialogues from outer and expanding circles, which can be done even by those who are not in leadership positions. It comes from the supplemental activities and lessons we choose. Matsuda (2012) adds to the argument by stating that we must respect these varieties of World Englishes, especially in places where inner-circle varieties are privileged. Thus, to enact change toward equality, there must be varieties of English in the classroom in both EFL and ESL contexts.

I have personally implemented World Englishes into my classroom. The curriculum that my school administration has chosen brings in a variety of Englishes into the texts, listening activities, and videos. Additionally, when I can, I try to show differences between American English and British English. I do not devalue one or the other, but I present them both as equally valuable, depending on the context in which the student desires to be involved. When I choose supplemental readings, videos, or listening, I strive to not just draw from American English texts or stories revolving around Americans. At the very least, I seek to make my students aware that American or

British English are not the only legitimate forms of English. Often-times, students have this presumption, and raising awareness of World Englishes is an important first step for students.

Response 2: Education for Both NESTs and NNESTs

There must be more education for all educators of English. First, NESTs and NNESTs must be aware of the historical spread of English and the various users and uses for the language throughout the world in order to have “critical awareness of the power inequity that the language’s colonial past may imply and that the users of EIL [English as an international language] may need to deal with” (Matsuda, 2003, p. 722). In other words, teachers of the language—both native and nonnative speakers—must have a broader understanding of the wider uses and issues related to the language, including cultural knowledge. Just because someone is a native speaker of an inner-circle variety of English does not mean that he or she has better insights on English-speaking cultures (Reis, 2009). Instead, English language instructors should seek to understand other Englishes and their cultures. Doing this puts NESTs in a similar position as NNESTs, as they both must understand cultures other than their own, which may help to lessen the inequity between the two groups. Instructors may become more educated through talking to people from all circles of English, as well as reading journals, articles, and publications on the subject. Administrators may implement more professional development, providing the educators at the institutions with resources to be more aware of the history and current status of all Englishes.

In my experience, I have learned that being an NS is not enough to constitute being an effective English teacher. During my first few weeks in France as an EFL teacher, I was overwhelmed. Even though I was considered the “expert” in the language, I felt incredibly underqualified to be leading a class. I learned quickly that my native knowledge of English was insufficient, and I realized that I needed formal TESOL pedagogy training. Another component of my teacher training has been becoming aware of other World Englishes and their cultures so that I can promote them in my classes. As I continue to develop as an NS graduate student and educator, I believe that I will continue to improve my pedagogical practice and understanding of other cultures throughout my career.

Response 3: Avoiding Monolingualism

In addition to teacher education concerning social, cultural, and historical components of language, there must be professional development for NNESTs to improve their language skills. Tatar and Yildiz

(2010) suggest that instead of spending a lot of money on (oftentimes) unqualified NESTs, school administrations should invest in both professional-development activities and opportunities for cross-cultural learning and language development. While this was advice for an EFL context in Turkey, this concept can still be applied to an ESL context in an inner-circle country, such as the US. As teachers and administrators, we can seek to empower NNESTs by ensuring quality language teaching and cultural training.

Furthermore, a unique duty of NESTs can be to learn another language (Moussu, 2006; Phillipson, 1992b). Phillipson (1992b) argues that learning a second language should be a requirement of ESL/EFL teachers in order that they have more familiarity with the language and culture of their students. However, some argue that NESTs' learning another language could increase their sense of privilege. Kubota (2009) argues that when NSs of English learn another language, they make their bag of privileges even greater, further increasing the gap between the privileged and nonprivileged. For example, NSs of English are praised when they learn a second language, yet NNSs are expected to have competency in English as their second language. Despite his point, I believe that monolingualism is undesirable because the promotion of monolingualism has a tendency to generate a sense of superiority. Learning another language, however, mitigates a state of privilege by promoting humility (Snow, 2001).

Learning French as my second language has had a profound impact on my life. I began to learn French when I was 16, and after two years of language study, I traveled to Switzerland to be immersed in the French-speaking world, while also taking classes at a language school. Learning French and living in a different country opened my mind to the perspectives of another culture. While I appreciated the cross-cultural experience, when I lived in France as an EFL teacher, I struggled with advancing my knowledge of the language while still holding onto my identity as an English-speaking American. Learning another language has been integral to my teacher training because it has given me cross-cultural appreciation as well as insight into my students' experiences and empathy for their language-learning processes.

Response 4: Encouraging Reflection and Open Conversation

Last, there must be support for NNESTs outside of professional development. As noted above, many NNESTs are not confident in their roles as English teachers, stemming from the NS fallacy that NESTs are better instructors and the perception that dominant varieties of English are the ideal. Reis (2012) recommends that there be a system in place that allows NNESTs to "articulate, internalize, and

claim empowering identity options as rightful English speakers and teachers if they are to challenge unexamined and harmful assumptions about their skills, role, and professional legitimacy as teachers” (p. 35). This sort of questioning the norm enables NNESTs to view themselves as legitimate professionals and rightful owners of the language. Support can also come from encouraging NNEST colleagues to become involved in NNEST caucuses or interest groups. Wu (2005) notes that being involved in one of these groups was highly empowering as it gave her support, increased awareness of NNEST needs and strengths, and ways to respond to discrimination in the TESOL field.

If I had not talked with NNSs about their experience as TESOL educators, I would have never known how difficult being an NNEST can be. By learning from their experiences, I have gained a broader understanding of the issues surrounding NNESTs in a more personal way. Making a safe space where open conversation is permitted and nurtured creates opportunity for mutual learning. In my experience, asking difficult questions presents the opportunity for reflection. For example, I had a conversation with a teacher who professed to be an NS in order to get jobs, despite the fact that he spent many of his younger years abroad without speaking English. Upon our talking further, he admitted that he might not be an NS, or he was at least an NS of two languages. Giving him space to reflect allowed us to learn from each other about these issues, and in a similar way, creating an environment conducive to open conversation might be beneficial for many NNESTs if they feel in any way inadequate, even if subconsciously.

Closing Remarks

Vandrick (2009) declares that those in the education field are reluctant to discuss the ideas of privilege. However, it is necessary to be cognizant of the privileges and benefits one enjoys and the potential effects that those without such privilege might face in order to make a change and raise awareness to others in the field. I originally got involved in this career simply because of unearned privilege—I was able to get a job without much training or experience—and through my graduate student development I am becoming aware of the importance of this issue. While I have not found the ultimate solution for discrimination, through my experience I have found practical ways to mitigate this inequality between NESTs and NNESTs.

While there has been much improvement and research focused on NNEST issues through books, caucuses, and journals, there is still much to explore. I hope that any native speakers who have read this are convinced to examine their own privileges and that nonnative speakers are empowered to make changes as well. Recognition of NS

privilege has led to the realization of the necessity to think critically about where we choose to work and invest our skills as educators. We must ask several questions such as:

1. Does this organization hire NNESTs?
2. Does it hire based on race?
3. Does it empower NNESTs and educate NESTs?
4. Does it value only inner-circle varieties of English?

In our field, we must pursue positions that align with our value systems and seek to implement changes if they do not. NEST and NNEST educators must contribute to the ongoing effort to promote equality by reflecting on their privilege and experience, increasing their cultural and pedagogical knowledge, and continuing to question the native speaker fallacy.

Author

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