The native-speaker *fever* in English language teaching (ELT): Pitting pedagogical competence against historical origin[*]

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Abstract

This paper discusses English language teaching (ELT) around the world, and argues that as a profession, it should emphasise pedagogical competence rather than native-speaker requirement in the recruitment of teachers in English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) contexts. It establishes that being a native speaker does not make one automatically a competent speaker or, of that matter, a competent teacher of the language. It observes that on many grounds, including physical, sociocultural, technological and economic changes in the world as well as the status of English as official and national language in many post-colonial regions, the distinction between native and non-native speakers is no longer valid.

1   Introduction

The English language teaching (ELT) industry has in the past several years become a major cross-cultural, trans-cultural, and worldwide enterprise. With the death of distance, the disappearance of many national boundaries, and the prioritisation of regional and trans-national economies, prospects for widespread lingua francas, English being one of the most prominent, have tremendously increased. Having spread under varying circumstances to diverse regions of the world predominantly through "the joint outcome of Britain's colonial expansion and the more recent activity of the US" (Graddol 1997: 9), English today enjoys international recognition and vitality. On this account, Crystal (1997: 139) observes that "there has never been a language so widely spread or spoken by so many people as English. There are therefore no precedents to help us see what happens to a language when it achieves genuine world status." What impact does this spread have on native speakers of English and others for whom English is a vital but not a native language or mother tongue, per se? This question, which has often been interpreted from social and attitudinal standpoints, has factored in the distinction between native and non-native speakers, which now seems to replace proficiency in the language and professional training in ELT. This distinction has also

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created a strong preference for the historical[1] (by virtue of origin) native speaker over any other professional – generally a historical non-native to the so-called native English countries. Although, in black-and-white the distinction in itself is valid, it has, in the case of English, ceased to be reliable given the great changes in the physical, technological, economic and migratory trajectories of the present era and, above all, the permanent status of English as official and national language in post-colonial regions. These regions also have native speakers of their own varieties of English, who, as the case may be, contribute equally to the global evolution and spread of the language as well. Moreover, English emerged and evolved in these contexts through an ecologically different itinerary from the so-called native regions. So, an advertisement like the following, used by the Global English School in Thailand (see Bamgbose 2001: 357), is less representative of the ELT industry today: "All of our English teachers are native-speakers, teaching natural English as it is spoken in real conversation." The general conception of the (historical) native speaker as the infallible or perfect teacher of his or her language, which this paper seeks to redress, certainly influenced the above statement. Such a conception clearly disregards other determinant factors in ELT such as professional training, educational qualification, experience, language proficiency, and sociocultural implications. These factors add a more relevant dimension to any meaningful ELT programme than just the status of a native speaker. A number of examples have been used to demonstrate this reliance on native-speaker origin without corresponding proficiency or professional ability in ELT.

2　English on the international platform today

The international arena seems to be constantly gravitating towards English. There has been since the mid-1990s a strong tilt towards English in business, technology, scholarly journals and publications, international relations and law. For instance, in 1966 Dickson and Cumming (1996) discovered that English was the most popular modern language studied in the world. From a survey of foreign languages taught in the Russian federation, they found out that 60% of secondary school students chose English, 25% went in for German, and 15% took French as foreign language. These students, like many other people, see English as a means of associating with the rest of the world, which has predominantly shifted towards English expression. In the academia this shift is also evident and ranges from the award of certificates in English and the pursuit of degrees in English in non-English speaking countries to the publication of scholarly journals in English. A good example is the Mexican Medical Journal *Archivos de Investigacion Médica*. It initially published all articles in Spanish only, but gradually shifted to English by "first publishing abstracts in English, then providing English translations of all articles, [and then] finally hiring an American editor, accepting articles only in English and changing its name to Archives of Medical Research" (Graddol 1997: 9; Gibbs 1999). The shift from Spanish to English confirms the strength of English internationally, but

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[1] The historical native speaker is someone born in one of the native English-speaking countries: Britain, USA, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. This is in opposition to those who have English as a second language, i. e. the postcolonial varieties.

the hiring of an American editor, somehow reverts to the reliance on the native speaker[2] as the only linguistically efficient person for the job.

English occupies a dominant position in (English as a) second language (ESL) or post-colonial countries where it is the official and national language on which national identities are built. It is also the medium of education and/or a compulsory subject in the school curriculum. This is the case with India, Singapore, parts of West, South and East Africa, and most of the other former British colonies. English is now part of the sociocultural set up of these countries. It has a long history of naturalisation, nativisation, and indigenisation that has resulted in the existence of regional varieties of the language generally referred to as New Englishes, Non-native Englishes, Indigenised Vernacular Englishes (IVEs) (see Anchimbe 2005). From these two domains of usage (EFL in the Russian example and ESL in the postcolonial states), it is evident that English "provides a vehicular language for international communication and it forms the basis of constructing cultural identities" (Graddol 1997:56). The construction of cultural identities on English offers it multiple ownerships (Kachru 1986) in the regions in which it is used. Ownership of English, in this case, signals the emergence of native speakers for each of the new varieties that cropped from the expansion of the language.

Another important domain in which English has gained international renown is in book publication. According to Graddol (1997) over 60 countries in the world publish books in English. In a survey of world annual publications in thirteen languages, Graddol (1997: 9) discovered that English has the highest percentage of publications (28%). Table 1 below reports the different percentages. This reveals that even countries that have no historical or colonial links with native English countries (particularly England or America) have adopted the language in a bid to benefit from its international wealth and ever-increasing international readership.

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[2] Although in this case the proficiency and expertise of the native-speaker (American editor) may not be in question, it still betrays the belief that only the historical native-speaker can do such a job. The examples presented in this study are a bit different since they seem to prioritise native origin above proficiency and competence.

Table 1. Annual world book publications in 13 languages (compiled from Graddol 1997: 9)

Languages	Percentage
English	28
Chinese	13.3
German	11.8
French	7.7
Spanish	6.7
Japanese	5.1
Russian	4.7
Portuguese	4.5
Korean	4.4
Italian	4.0
Dutch	2.4
Swedish	1.6
Other	5.8

With the rising strength of the economies of some English as a foreign language (EFL) countries, especially in the Asian sub-continent, there is likely to be a drastic growth in the number of books published in English in these areas. The proliferation of publications in these predominantly L2 and L3 regions, however, predicts a diminishing attachment to some of the varieties that have been highlighted as the authentic (i.e. the native varieties). Moreover, if the number of native speakers of the so-called non-native (postcolonial) varieties continues to increase at the rate it is doing (see Alobwede 1998; Anchimbe 2005, in press) these varieties may one day spread far beyond their borders to the rest of the world. This is verifiable in, for instance, the number of Africans teaching English as a foreign language in China, Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and Thailand.

Trends in the 1990s and the early 2000s show that variations in speech patterns have rendered English tongues, whether native or non-native, very distinct and that some parts of the vocabulary are peculiar to particular regions – West Africa, India, Australia, Britain or The Caribbean. However, Strevens (1992: 39) upholds truly that "two components of English are taught and learned without [extensive] variation: these are its grammar and its core vocabulary." This means that native speakers have just the same intelligibility and communicative challenges to cope with as non-native speakers. Even though, advocates of a monochrome international standard (Prator 1968; Quirk 1990; Abbot 1991 etc.) may argue that regional varieties have sown unintelligibility or advocates of regional standards may claim the New Englishes are quite peculiar in themselves, what is worth noting is that English is still the effective medium that links the far parts of the world and their diverse mother tongues on the international platform. Proficiency seems to have taken a far more prominent place rather than just native origin – a fact most easily verifiable in the worldwide quest for teachers of English, most of whom have been drawn from the ESL regions. However, the insistence on the native origin requirement by some ELT employers is putting the clock back on the international intelligibility accommodations speakers make to one another and risks

transforming ELT into a field of sheer opportunism that favours only the historical native speakers.

3   The native speaker: some theoretical implications

The use of the native speaker has a long history in all sub disciplines of linguistics. From methodologies to theories of language study the native speaker occupies a basic position as a springboard for the judgement of language production and evaluation. The major conviction behind the native speaker is that s/he can at anytime give valid and stable judgements on his or her language. S/he is capable of identifying ill-formed grammatical expressions in his or her language even though s/he may not be able to explain exactly why they are ill-formed (Chomsky 1965). Many linguistic schools of thought have based their findings on native-speaker judgements and performances. In transformational-generative grammar, the native speaker is the backbone of Chomsky's (1965) "ideal-speaker hearer"; in context grammar, van Dijk's (1977) "P-system" is built on it; in politeness theory, Brown and Levinson's (1987) "model person" is the native speaker; and the bilingualism theories of Bloomfield (1933) and other American linguists focus on native-like competence in two languages. These theories rely on native-speaker impulse or spontaneity to familiar or strange constructions, well-formed or ill-formed utterances in his or her language. This is accepted as authentic because native speakers acquire their languages at childhood with no other language interfering or influencing the acquisition process.

However, some linguists have used the native speaker as pacesetter of standards even for varieties of the language s/he is not familiar with. In the case of English, it is perhaps motivated by the colonial genesis of the New Englishes – often equated to the colonial definitions of the colonised subjects and regions. Prejudices and bias have been central to descriptions of the New Englishes. For instance, Prator (1968) calls the recognition of post-colonial Englishes a heresy and Hocking (1974: 46), from a similar standpoint, adamantly declares that "the point is that what is correct in a language is just what native speakers of the language say. There is no other standard." While the native speaker may be deemed ideal for ELT, it is far from saying s/he is infallible, as Hocking wants us to believe. This is because "most native speakers of English in the world are native speakers of some nonstandard variety of the language" (Trudgill 1998: 35, see also Mufwene 1997). On this ground, they like the non-native speakers (especially those for whom English is an official language) have similar proficiency, professional, and sociocultural stages to deal with. The issue is, a British born and bred in the Yorkshire region and who ends up acquiring the York dialect has the same challenges in achieving ELT proficiency just like a Nigerian born in Lagos, acquires a Nigerian native language or Nigerian Pidgin English and is introduced to English in school.

The exclusively theoretical concept of the native speaker by linguistic schools of thought explained above received social prejudice in the 1970s when (ex)colonial states started claiming ownership of varieties of colonial languages, which they used as official and national languages. The distinction non-native speakers became prominent and was based on the perception of the colonial subjects by the colonialists as backward, primitive, non-literate,

and unimportant masses. They were therefore considered incompetent speakers, inadequate learners and above all "illegitimate offspring" of English (Mufwene 1994, 2001). An obscure reason for this is that the colonialists intentionally refused to teach English properly to the colonised people for fear that "the coloniser's code, if shared equally with the colonised, would reduce the distance between the rulers and the ruled" (Kachru 1986: 22). To add to that, "British settlers were most reluctant to use English with their [African] native servants and with Africans in general, as they believed that this knowledge might 'spoil' them in the master-servant relationship that existed" (Abdulaziz 1991: 395). In spite of these misteach or unteach power regulatory mechanisms (see Anchimbe and Anchimbe, forthcoming), it cannot however be upheld that the distinctiveness of post-colonial Englishes is based on the errors promoted by the colonialists. These varieties have been found to be systematic and logical in the variations they exhibit. The question we now ask but would not delve into is, when does one, in this case, cease to be a non-native speaker, when s/he is the only 'reliable' person to make stable judgements about his or her variety of English? It is interesting to note that at this time when more non-native teachers are involved in ELT than native, when English is progressively being detached from the native English-speaking countries, when lesser attention is being paid to accent, when the so-called non-native speakers of English outnumber the native, that some institutions still run after and are caught by the fever of recruiting only (historical) native-speaking teachers.

4   Correctness and the native speaker

As Hocking (1974) alongside many others believes the native speaker is error-free and since s/he learns the language from infancy, s/he has an unquestionable proficiency and efficiency in it. This is the common (perhaps erroneous) notion of a native speaker. Is the native speaker infallible? Being a native speaker is no guarantee for competence in communication. Communication itself is far more latent than the words used in the process. This is because there is a large infrastructure of social and cultural elements that determine what must be said and how it must be said. Moreover, from a purely grammatical point of view, even in native areas, poor and inefficient speakers are still found. Error analysis in linguistic study did not emerge from the study of non-native speakers but from the study of native speakers. Pettman (1913) in a statement on the use of English by fellow Britons in South Africa lament: "It gives an Englishman, who loves the sentence that is lucid and logical, a shock to hear his native tongue maltreated by those who are just as English as himself" (qtd Görlach 1995 :19). So any ELT attempt that is primarily based on native-speaker origins without solid ELT training is not a safe haven for error-free language transmission.

Do levels of competence and proficiency apply to a native speaker? The issue of correctness, that is, respect for rules of the language, is so complex that being a native speaker does not automatically qualify one as a competent speaker. Several factors account for this; language change, dialect variations, sociocultural contexts, professional backgrounds, cultural variation and so forth. It therefore means native speakers can be classified on a scale of competence just like other speakers who acquire proficiency in the language. And in ELT, which today has moved far beyond the borders of the UK or US, and with the emergence of several

regional norms of the language, the sociocultural element – often the major defining icon of these norms – is very important.

5   ELT practice and the native-speaker *fever*

In many EFL countries, the quest for native speaker or native-like proficiency is still high. It is less so in the ESL countries where education is the barometer for proficiency in the language. This is basically because English in these contexts is introduced in school and is used generally in formal situations and in education related jobs. English, as said above, is the official language of these countries. But in the EFL contexts, English is an additional language whose importance is dictated by its economic and international necessity. In Germany, for instance, English is used in several sectors including the local train services (S-Bahn i. e. sub-urban, and U-Bahn i. e. underground, trains).

This section deals with adverts of vacancies for teachers of English in both educational institutions and individual or private homes. The examples are drawn from Germany. It was discovered that although English is a foreign language, one of the most learned as additional modern language, there was still a strong attachment to and request for native-speaking teachers. No distinction, as the following examples show, was made to the origin of the native speaker. There was no indication that an American, British, Australian, etc. would be preferred. This further indicates that it is not the quest for perfection that drives this demand for native-speaker teachers but rather a social prestige. This is primarily because ELT is a profession and not a natural part of a native-English speaker.

In this first advert, more emphasis is laid on the status, i. e. the origin, of the prospective applicant rather than on his or her level of education and professional experience. There is no room for the so-called non-native speaker who could be a proficient and experienced professional.

> If you are a native speaker of either English or German, have a university degree and/or professional experience, we would be delighted to have you on our young and dynamic team. (*The Language Laboratory*)

The priority of place given to the native requirement, although not specific to any country, indicates that native-speaker origin is rated above university degree and professional experience, which are not mandatory. So, as the advert indicates, a native speaker would not need a university degree or professional training in ELT to qualify for this job.

Some prospective employers insist on native-speaker origin together with other requirements. In the following advert, it does not only suffice to be a native speaker, but a dynamic, professional and experienced native language trainer. Here at least, attention is partially paid to certain ELT-specific qualities, which may eliminate some of the so-called native speakers. This is not the case with the advert above that gives gospel credence to native origin rather than to professional and pedagogic competence.

> Are you a dynamic, professional and experienced native language trainer looking of a one-of-a-kind teaching experience? Company and intensive course positions are waiting to be filled. (arCanum AKADEMIE)

The search for native-speaker teachers of English referred to above as a fever has gripped not only the ELT field but also other domains of normal life. It is interesting that other jobs that do not require language transmission as ELT equally require native-speaker status. Germany is the holiday destination for holidaymakers from various linguistic backgrounds, prominent among them Japanese, Chinese, and other Asians. In the following example from Munich City Bike Tour Company, an important employment requirement is native English speakers in spite of the multicultural visitors envisaged. Although the entire world is gravitating towards English, it is far from saying it is doing so towards a given native-variety. If this were so, then regional and national varieties of the language would not exist today.

The Munich City Bike Tour Company, as the following advert shows, is ready to employ only native speakers of English in its guides and sales services. It is further interesting to note that the first requirement is not "high energy" or "fit and fun", which they claim is what they sell but rather native-English status. It might be thought that only native-English speakers visit Germany or need the bike tour services.

> Munich City Bike Tour Company is looking for guides/sales staff to round out the 2004 season. Must be native English speakers, high energy, fit and FUN (that's what we sell!) seasonal though October, flexible schedule and good pay.

As shown by Anchimbe (2005) of Cameroon, many families today send their kids to English-medium schools. This makes them to have English as first language (see also the Status Mother Tongue concept of Alobwede 1998). In a similar manner and as shown in the following advert, some German families want their children to acquire English at an early age. This is not mentioned in the advert below but it can be deduced from the emphasis put on the "native English speaking Mary poppins" that the intension is to enable the children learn English.

> We are a German family, living in a castle near Munich. We have four children (3, 5, 12, & 13 years old) and two people who help us with the housework. Now we are looking for a native English speaking "Mary poppins". Are you affectionate, creative, powerful and do you love children? We offer you an attractive full-time live-in position.

Again, as in the first advert, the focus is not so much on the qualities: affectionate, creative and love for children, but rather on the native-speaker status. This certainly indicates that these other qualities might be waived if the native-speaker requirement is met.

Apart from the above insistence on native-speaker status, there are other institutions that are less restrictive. As the next advert shows, the native-speaker status can be replaced by a very good knowledge of English. Like above this job has nothing to do with ELT but native English performance is a requirement. It is not as mandatory as in the others. It is optional since it is put in brackets and can be replaced by good knowledge of the language.

> Meeting point, Language & Intercultural Training is looking for experienced and flexible nannies (native speaker or very good knowledge of English), who are able to take care of small groups (2-6 children). EU citizens or valid work-permit necessary.

This advert does not insist on native-English origin probably because the institution is an intercultural training facility. It rather gives preference to intercultural training, which involves not only people from native-English countries. This tolerance is witnessed in some ELT contexts. There is seemingly, recognition of qualification and proficiency, and as the next example shows, even without the native-speaker requirement but rather with native-level proficiency.

> Preschool teacher wanted for our English-speaking Montessori preschool (ages 2, 5-6).… Full-time position. Native level English required. Montessori qualifications preferred. (Rainbow Preschool Munich)

Adverts and announcements like the ones quoted above abound. The native-speaker fever is fuelled by the belief that native speakers are perfect in their language. This might be true but it is not the case in every situation especially in ELT. This is because there are many more challenges of a different kind to overcome in the ELT classroom than just living up to the status of a native speaker. These examples drawn predominantly from Germany indicate that the teacher must be quite familiar not only with his English language material but even more so with the sociocultural, socio-political and other ecological realities of Germany, to be effective. Language teaching is not independent of societal and sociocultural reality. For any ELT exercise to be successful it has to incorporate these aspects from the given society and not from the native. This brings the language closer to the learner and bridges any communicative gaps that could be caused by differences in societal reality. This makes the native-speaker requirement insufficient and to some degree unnecessarily restrictive.

6   The native speaker and ELT challenges

Besides the pedagogical challenges above, there are other demographic challenges that render it impossible for all ELT positions to be filled by teachers from native-English countries. According to Kachru (1985) English is used in the world by three types of speakers: the native (ENL), the second language (ESL) and the foreign language (EFL) speakers. This classification follows the patterns of acquisition and the functions of English in these contexts. Crystal (1997) attempts to provide numbers for each of these classifications. According to his statistics there are 375 million native speakers of English, 375 million speakers of English as a second language (ESL) and 750 million speakers of English as a foreign language (EFL). The non-native speakers are therefore thrice the number of native speakers. Even if all native speakers were to be employed in ELT they would not be enough to quench the *fever-like* quest for native-speaking teachers of English exemplified above. In the past five years many Asian nations, particularly China has been engaged in English language expansion programmes that have employed thousands of teachers from around the world. Many of these teachers are from ESL and EFL countries, especially less industrialised African, American and East European countries. The native-speaker requirement finds less

prominence because it is a far-fetched dream to employ only native speakers even if that were physically possible, it would be financially handicapped.

7   Redefinition of standards

It can be deduced from the above quest for native-English teachers and employees that the employers are in search of high standards based on social judgement. The social prestige component of it has nullified the quest for competence and proficiency. Such insistence on native-speaker perfection defeats the intent of globalisation and, rather than providing "globalisation jobs" to all, it is reviving what Phillipson's (1992) terms "linguistic imperialism." And because of this, Bamgbose (2001: 360) advises that "the opportunity offered by globalisation must not be allowed to degenerate into opportunism." For instance, on the website of the "Global English School" in Thailand, this rather non-global statement is used as a source of pride: "All of our English teachers are native speakers, teaching natural English as it is spoken in real conversation." It must be realised that English has become too complex to be tied to the strings of native and non-native statuses. Its complexity can be likened to that of an oil tanker that spilled oil on the Welsh coast while trying to enter the terminal. Here is a headline capturing the multinational identity of the ship.

> Built in Spain; owned by a Norwegian; registered in Cyprus; managed from Glasgow; chartered by the French; crewed by Russians; flying a Liberian flag; carrying an American cargo; and pouring oil on the Welsh coast. (Headline in *Independent*, 22 February 1996: 1, qtd Graddol 1997: 32).

English today is just as complex as this ship. Blame or praise for it cannot be directed to just one source irrespective of whether it is native or not because both sources have been instrumental in the trajectory of English around the world. There is therefore a need for the redefinition of standards.

Competence or proficiency and not origin must be judged as a prerequisite for especially ELT positions. Not all native speakers are proficient in their native languages. ELT is not a natural element of native speakers but a profession that requires due training and efficiency. Moreover, how native a native speaker must be cannot be effectively measured and tested because there is great variation in native standards; there are many substandard and non-standard varieties of the so-called native varieties; and of course as mentioned earlier, native speakers are native speakers of non-standard dialects of their languages. To take the example of Southern Germany (parts of Bavaria), native speakers of Standard German or 'Hochdeutsch' are in essence native speakers of Bairish. And it is, at least for the non-Bairish speakers, difficult to say knowledge of Standard German automatically creates intelligibility with Bairish. From another perspective, Germans who learn the standard variety i. e. 'Hochdeutsch' long after acquiring one of the dialects may have just the same intelligibility nuances as non-native learners, and this goes also for the dialects of English on the British Isles.

8   Conclusion

Finally, it is important to note that while the term native may still be too restrictive, its traditional restriction may have been overcome. In the next decade, those areas said to be using English as a second language would have many speakers who use English as their first language. They will be native speakers of their variety of English. Will they, as a matter of fact, be non-native speakers or native speakers? Again, English in these zones is taught exclusively by historical non-natives. So, native-speaker origin and status, in the light of this paper, are less realistic parameters that need to be corroborated with professional training, efficiency, competence, and proficiency in the ELT enterprise.

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