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## **“STUDENTS” VIEWS OF MEXICAN NATIONALS AS ENGLISH TEACHERS”**

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## “STUDENTS” VIEWS OF MEXICAN NATIONALS AS ENGLISH TEACHERS”

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### RESUMEN

Este documento discute el impacto que el estatus como hablantes no-nativos del idioma inglés (NNEs, siglas en inglés) ha tenido en seis connacionales Mexicanos como maestros del idioma extranjero. La idea del hablante nativo como el maestro ideal del inglés es explorada desde las perspectivas y experiencias de los maestros no-nativos del inglés (NNEs, siglas en inglés) basadas en la manera en que son percibidos por sus alumnos. A través de entrevistas en forma de narrativas personales, las historias de vida de los maestros no-nativos del inglés fueron recabadas con la finalidad de analizar las experiencias y retos a los que se confrontan en la profesión con relación a su estatus como hablantes no-nativos. La información muestra que los NNEs se confrontan con situaciones de credibilidad y aceptación por parte de sus alumnos en base a factores como el de ser nativos y de etnicidad. Esto por supuesto tiene un impacto en la vida profesional y personal de los maestros de inglés.

**Palabras claves:** nativos/no nativos del idioma inglés, etnicidad.

### SUMMARY

This paper discusses the impact that the status as non-native English speakers (NNEs) has had in six Mexican nationals as teachers of the foreign language. The idea of the native speaker as the ideal teacher of English is explored from the non-native English teachers’ (NNEs) perspectives and experiences, based on the way they are perceived by their students. Through interviews in the form of personal narratives, NNEs’ life stories were collected in order to analyse the experiences and challenges that they face in the profession as non-native speakers. The data shows that NNEs are confronted with issues of credibility and acceptance on the part of their students based on factors of nativeness and ethnicity. This of course has an impact in the NNEs’ professional and personal lives.

**Key words:** native/non-native English speakers, ethnicity.

### INTRODUCTION: THE STATUS OF ENGLISH IN MEXICO

The study at hand was carried out in a Mexican University, where the increasing need for English language teachers has created a numerous group of non-native English speaker teachers who teach alongside native English speakers. How did such a demand for English teaching come about and why have so Mexican

teachers become part of the English Language Teaching (ELT) field?

The English language achieved a special status in Mexico when in 1994 former President Ernesto Zedillo gave special priority to its formal instruction. Through the Ministry of Education (SEP), a national policy was established that made English a mandatory subject in the National Educational curriculum. During the last sixteen years the Mexican government has increased financial support to make English instruction available at all educational levels. English teacher training programs have been opened nationwide to train professionals in the field.

The importance of business, tourism and the geographical proximity of the United States are other factors which have prompted Mexico to emphasize the importance of English language training. In many ways, Mexico is playing a catch-up game with the industrialized Asian nations and Europe in terms of English language training. The demand for teachers is so great that native English speakers cannot possibly supply all the language education needs of Mexico. Therefore, it is against this background, where both native and non-native speakers are employed in order to meet the needs of the Mexican educational system, that this study takes place.

### Literature Review

This section analyses the existing literature concerning the controversy about the relative merits of native and non-native English teachers, paying particular attention to linguistic perspectives and issues of ethnicity.

### The Ideal Teacher: Defining the Native Speaker

Although linguists have varied ideas of what defines the native speaker, there is no single

straightforward definition that could cover all the various concepts associated with this term. For instance, Lightbown and Spada (1999:177) believe that although native speakers may differ in their stylistic aspect of language use, they „tend to agree on the basic grammar of the language.“ Widdowson (1996) refers to this ability in the use of language as “that aspect of performance which makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his knowledge of linguistic rules.”

Rampton (1990) on the other hand, notes that most individuals associate the concept of „nativeness“ with the notion that an individual can only be a native speaker of one language; therefore, people are, or are not, native speakers. However, this author argues that an individual can be part of more than one social group; therefore, the individual can acquire more than one language. Nonetheless, Chomsky perceives native competency as a „generic endowment“. Competence, he defines, is „the knowledge that native speakers have of their language as a system of abstract formal relations“ (Cited in Widdowson 1996:24). In other words, the intuitive knowledge of what is grammatical and ungrammatical in a language. Thus, for Chomsky, this quality is what makes the native speaker the ultimate authority in language usage, as the native speaker is endowed with the capacity and generative power of grammar, allowing for superior productive exploitation. This is probably the main argument that has led to the idealization of the native speakers' role in the ELT field.

#### **NNESTs' Comparative Disadvantages**

Tang (1997) relates the findings of a survey of 47 NNESTs in Hong Kong. The study was designed to identify teachers' perceptions of the proficiency and competency of native and non-native English speaker teachers. The survey showed that native speakers are considered superior in terms of speaking (100 per cent), pronunciation (92 per cent), listening (87 per cent), vocabulary (79 per cent) and reading (72 per cent). These findings, the author wrote, „reiterate the fact that native speakers are more often respected as models of English“ than NNESTs. Other categories where the NS is

perceived to be superior are pragmatics and the amount of information provided about the foreign culture according to a study conducted by Llurda (2005).

#### **NNESTs' Comparative Advantages**

Medgyes (1992) explains six reasons for which NNESTs' acquired language abilities might represent an advantage over those of the NEST, at least in an educational setting. For instance, NNESTs as successful L2 learners can teach learning strategies more effectively. Furthermore, they can provide more information about L2, and they are more able to anticipate students' difficulties. They can also be more sympathetic to students' needs and problems, and in fact it is only the NNEST that has the complete set of benefits derived from sharing the students' mother tongue.

Although these qualities represent an advantage, the insistence that NNESTs should prove native-like competence in order to be recognized as English teachers can lead to feelings of disempowerment, even as far as accepting not being recognized as ELT professionals (Medgyes 1992). NNESTs sometimes give up on their investment in the language. Either way, under these circumstances, teachers' language performance and formation of a professional identity suffer. Professional identity is defined as „a set of externally ascribed attributes that are used to differentiate one group from another“ (Sachs 2001:153). But, as long as NNESTs are perceived as different and denied full rights to the language they teach, they cannot be considered to share a common profession or have a common status with NESTs.

#### **Ethnicity**

In a study conducted by Amin (1997) in Canada on the relationship between race and the students' acceptance of ESL teachers, Amin concluded that there is indeed a connection in students' minds between ethnicity and language ability. „Ethnic identity is a slippery concept“ as Gaine wrote „ethnic group is not unambiguously and solely a social term. It refers mostly to culture but at times invokes physical appearance (2007:124-125).

In Amin's study, non-white teachers were consistently placed by students as non-Canadians and therefore, non-native speakers. In other words, in the students' conception it can only be white people who are native speakers and who know real English. However, there is evidence that indicates that the longer students are taught by non-native teachers, the more students become tolerant and supportive of them. (Llurda 2005). In fact, Medgyes has identified other variables which play a decisive role in the teaching/learning process such as experience, age, sex, aptitude, charisma, motivation and training. As he wrote these „non-language specific variables can apply to NESTs and non-NESTs in equal measure“ (1992:346).

### **Effects of Challenges to Credibility: Emotional & Professional**

Medgyes argues that many NNESTs „suffer from a harrowing sense of guilt for something they do not have the slightest chance of catching (sic), that is, native-like command of English“ (1983:5). This in turn could have very demoralizing effects on NNESTs due to the frustration and anxiety generated by their efforts to reach an unattainable ideal. NNESTs may experience problems with professional self-esteem because of this (Medgyes 1992). Thomas (1999:9) cites one NNEST, „I have found that experiences that challenge my credibility make me apologetic, nervous about my ability to succeed and sometimes even lead to a kind of paranoia born of experience... I always feel that I have to perform, or to show people that I am just as good as they [NESTs] are. I have NS colleagues, most of them without Ph.D.s, who somehow see me as not just different but as inferior. It is not that they say anything but I sense it. And then I find myself stammering and stuttering and making grammatical mistakes as I talk to them. When this happens I feel that they are

criticizing me, wondering how I could possibly teach the language.“

### **Research Method and Techniques**

This study was aimed at reaching insights based on the non-native English speaker teachers' life experiences; to capture their reality as perceived by them, within the setting of the Language School of the University of Guanajuato. The research question I posed was:

What are the experiences of Mexican nationals as teachers of the English language with their students?

### **The Research Method**

I chose ethnographic research methods for this study. Ethnographic research can be defined as the elaboration of a description or portrait of a culture or group of people by an observer/participant researcher. It is a type of qualitative research which is considered to be synonymous with social research (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983). Ethnographic fieldwork was first used by anthropologists „who wished to study a society or some aspect of a society, culture or group in depth“ (Bell 1999:12-13). Ethnography has become a useful tool for the study of groups in general, and it proved to be a good method for conducting the present study. This approach implies a great deal of integration into a group for the purposes of observation, thus the term observer/participant became pertinent as I both observed and participated in the characterization of the group under study. Having similar characteristics to the members of this group presented the problem of objectivity, which is discussed below. A further problem of the ethnographic approach is that of generalizability. The study of a particular group may not have universal application, although it can provide tools for similar groups to recognize and solve problems.

The ethnographic approach allowed me to focus on a particular social/professional group in an intensive fashion. As the ethnographic method relies on up-close personal experience and participation by the researcher, I had occasion to collect a complex strata of data by observing and interviewing the participants in the study. Such

data made it possible to provide a „portrait“ of individuals' attitudes, beliefs and behavior. In this way, I was able to narrate the NNESTs' story.

### **The Research Techniques**

This section discusses the research techniques used in the investigation. The goal was to develop a better understanding of the social processes that affect NNESTs. Interviews, along with observations and field notes were employed in order to obtain background information, knowledge, register feelings, opinions, and behavioral data. These means were used in order to give an open, holistic form to the study.

### **The Interviews**

The interviews, which took the form of narrative inquiry, were an important tool in gathering information for the making of my ethnographic picture. Narrative inquiry often takes the form of stories or personal narratives. Sfard and Prusak wrote that „story telling is integral to understanding lives and... all people construct narratives as a process of constructing and reconstructing identity“ (Cited in Marshall and Rossman 2006:6). The interviewees had the freedom to narrate their stories in a reflective, autobiographical way, with me as a listener. In this sense it could be said that „informants often speak in a story form during the interviews, and as a researcher, listening and attempting to understand, we hear their “stories”“ (Bell 1999:16)

Rather than a structured interview with its inherent risk of a preprogrammed answer, „story telling“ worked to facilitate the open expression of the interviewees' world in detail. Thus, I invited the interviewees to tell their stories in a detailed way. At certain points during the interviews, I invited the respondents to elaborate when I felt that they might be relying on our common background to supply missing information. So, the interviewees expressed themselves explicitly in the interview process, thereby avoiding poor or spurious data collection. Marshall and Rossman state that narrative analysis „seeks to describe the meaning of experience for those who frequently are

socially marginalized or oppressed, as they construct their stories about their lives“ (2006:6).

### **Field Notes**

Another valuable instrument for data collection was the use of „field notes“. The notes were a way to gather a variety of information derived from observations and casual conversations. These reports helped in analyzing the NNESTs' discourse and their perceptions of their environment. Furthermore, I recorded my personal perceptions stemming from the field notes in the margins and then on the computer, much in the manner of a diary. This was a tool that I used to record past events, comments, or memories related to the subject at hand. So, I was able to review things which seemed insignificant at first glance, but which later took on meaning as I reviewed my notes. These notes were taken during a five month period concurrent with the interview process.

### **The Interviewees' Background**

I interviewed six non-native English speakers. Some of the considerations taken into account in this sample selection were teaching experience, age and gender. These three factors provide a rich variety of experiences from different perspectives. Pseudonyms were given to respondents for the purpose of anonymity.

### **Findings and Discussion**

This section presents teachers' experiences about students' perspectives concerning issues of nativeness. This serves to present several vantage points from which the native/non-native controversy can be viewed and discussed.

### **Professional and Emotional Impact on NNESTs**

This section is concerned with how NNESTs interpret their students' reactions and expectations relating to their teaching.

All of my interviewees agree that it *does* affect them to see how the native speaker construct has found its way into shaping

students' beliefs that only a native speaker can teach English. The following two statements, made by Miguelito and Susanita respectively, indicate the students' preference for the native speaker. **„At first they see me very young and they think that I do not know how to teach... also because they see I am Mexican they probably think that I do not know much English... they show preference for a native speaker teacher, and it affects me...” (interview)** or as Susanita said **„Many students think that native teachers are better than non-native teachers...I used to feel like a bug because I wasn't a native, but not anymore” (interview)**. To be considered unequal in knowledge and performance to NESTs by their own students certainly has an emotional impact on the NNESTs in almost every case, although students' impressions tend to change after experiencing language learning with NNESTs. As discussed in the literature review, there are other factors that make the teaching/learning of a foreign language class an interesting and successful experience for students such as: aptitude, motivation and charisma. This is something that most of these teachers have been able to observe and appreciate from their students' reactions towards their work, Miguelito stated **“when they get to know me... how I work... they love my class!” (interview)**. At first sight then, English language teachers' performance might become subjected to native-speaker models as a point of reference, but later on the common reference of professionalism seems to emerge as the final criteria for acceptance.

So then, the students' notion that it is better to study with NESTs is redefined after they have the first hand opportunity to experience a class with a NNEST. Students become more tolerant and supportive of NNESTs. For instance Miguelito found that **„they like my accent better than that of the Americans because their [the Americans] accent is very strong**

**and they do not like that” (interview)**. Felipito's students stated that **„they have learned more with Mexicans than with Americans because they understand them better, they explain better because we know how they think” (interview)**. So then, the students' initial reservations towards NNESTs are reduced with exposure to the non-native teacher. As has been discussed in reference to NNESTs' Comparative Advantages in the literature review, sharing the same linguistic and cultural background are advantages that are also appreciated by students. This can be seen inversely in the experience of one of the British Council exchange (in the institution) teachers who expressed to me his concern about his students' evaluations, stating that **„they wrote that I wasn't friendly! I thought I had been friendly with them, I was very open... I thought I had been very helpful” (Field notes)**.

### **Ethnic Origins**

It is interesting to analyse how students construct belief systems that connect the ethnicity and physical appearance of the teacher to language their skills.

A former student of mine once showed his concern about his new (NNEST) teacher's qualifications. He was now going to be studying level five at the Language School, and it was clear that his concerns were mainly founded on his new teacher's appearance, his comment was **„Do you know anything about my new teacher...? He looks very „frijolero” [„beaner” like]... does he speak the language...?” (Field notes)**. „Beaner” is a pejorative term for Mexicans used in the United States. Needless to say, I was shocked by this discriminatory comment. Ironically, the teacher he was referring to was actually born in the USA. Though both his parents are Mexican, he should be considered a native speaker of English, having grown up and gone to school in the United States. One could argue that this student did not know his new teacher's background; therefore, he accepted without thinking the concept of ethnicity and language as being one and the same.

Students in the Language School also seem to make many connections between ethnicity and English language teaching ability, as Felipito's experience demonstrates „**at first they want a blond native speaker, the first impression always gets them, but as they get to know you, they accept you...It used to affect me but not any more...**” (interview). Students seem reluctant to study with Mexicans, because they do not fit the expectations of a blonde-haired and blue-eyed model. However, when an English language teacher from the same Institution made the comment „**You write pretty well for being a “Chicano”**”, (Field notes) then the discriminatory aspect of the relationship ethnicity-language as viewed by the professional teacher could be said to be extremely striking. „Chicano” is a pejorative term used to refer to Mexican-Americans. Whether this „white American” as my interviewee referred to the professor in question, knew that „the term „Chicano” had been replaced with Mexican-American since the 70’s” (Valentine 2004:86), the way in which it was used carried at least some discriminatory connotation. While the students of the Institution may be forgiven for their lack of sophistication in judging the relative merits of NESTs and NNESTs, native speakers should have more sophisticated ideas about teachers’ performances, preferably ones based on the professional ability of the individual.

Another experience that serves to highlight the connection between ethnic origin and language is narrated by a former language teacher in this school who described an event dating back to 1994: „**there were two NNESTs, brother and sister, who had grown up in the US, but because of their Hispanic names students wouldn’t register for their classes. What happened was that a „Class Schedule” was displayed in a big blackboard with the teachers’ names included. This was done so the students could choose their schedule. Students preferred to take their classes with native speakers. They [the brother and sister] used to complain because their groups were rather small compared with those of the native speakers. Eventually, the names of the teachers weren’t printed in the „Class Schedule” anymore**” (Field Notes). The students

were clearly making a link between the Spanish names and the ethnicity of the teachers, assuming that these teachers were Mexicans and therefore not as desirable as a native speaker of English would be.

There seems to be some evidence that students think of ethnic origin, nationality and language ability as interchangeable concepts. Even though students seem able to build up their trust in the abilities of NNESTs after having taken a class with them, their final evaluations still show hesitancy to fully trust NNESTs. „**Students are really hard in their evaluations, a question in the evaluation form reads „Does the teacher have good domain of the language that s/he teaches?” The students hardly ever rank you with a 5 when you are a non-native, 4 is the highest, never a 5 because you are not a native**” Mafalda (interview). My interviewee made reference to a colleague who let this kind of situation affect her so that she quit teaching. Miguelito confirms, „**there will be some teachers who might not feel very secure in the language or because of their personality... and they might feel threatened or feel that they do not have what they are supposed to have to offer**” (interview).

### Summary of Findings and Discussion

The seeming perception by students of the NNEST as being the less desirable teacher (at least initially) contributed to the impact on the NNESTs, affecting their professional and emotional lives. This group indicates a desire to be accepted more fully as professional teachers, demanding an abandonment of ethnicity or physical appearance as a standard in favour of the ideal of effective teaching.

### CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY

This study looked at a group of non-native English language teachers using an ethnographic approach in order to discover whether the native/non-native distinction has had any repercussions in the respondents’ professional and personal lives.

Learning from their experiences and from observing the context in which they work, my

research suggests that such an impact does exist. The respondents in the study have perceived it, they have experienced it, and are indeed aware of the crucial significance of the native/non-native labelling to their professional status as ELT practitioners. In my interviewees' experience they are subject to criticisms and judgements on the part of their students. Further, NNESTs many times feel anxiety about their language competence. Unfortunately for the NNESTs, as the literature on this matter shows, many language teachers will experience problems with professional self-esteem and self-confidence regarding their language proficiency.

### **Implications of the Study Language Proficiency**

NNESTs should never stop investing in their language skills. As Medgyes wrote „one of the most important professional duties non-NESTs have to perform is to improve their command of English“ (1992:348). NNESTs should seek opportunities to continue studying and improving their language skills. This not only will reflect in their teaching practice and level of professionalism, but also, they will be gaining confidence as language users.

### **English as an International Language**

Another important concept that seems to be ignored is the function or purpose of instruction of English in Mexico, namely as a tool for international communication. This characteristic needs to be clearly emphasized to the students. If they are to communicate in a multicultural world with people from different cultures, ethnicities and languages, students will have to learn how to promote their identity *in* and *through* the English language. Language interaction will occur not only with NSs, but also between non-native speakers, thereby eliminating the need for the acquisition of a native-like competence to be an effective language user. Thus, neither teachers nor students need to sound like Americans or Britons to be successful language users in their journey into the global community with the use of English.

On a final note, I would like to thank the participants in this study who entrusted me with

their personal experiences, thoughts and feelings.

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