



# NATIVE VS NON-NATIVE ENGLISH TEACHERS

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## Abstract

*Although the majority of English language teachers worldwide are non-native English speakers (NNS), no research was conducted on these teachers until recently. A pioneer research by Peter Medgyes in 1994 took quite a long time until the other researchers found their interests in this issue. There is a widespread stereotype that a native speaker (NS) is by nature the best person to teach his/her foreign language. In regard to this assumption, we then see a very limited room and opportunities for a non native teacher to teach language that is not his/hers. The aim of this article is to analyze the differences among these teachers in order to prove that non-native teachers have equal advantages that should be taken into account. The writer expects that the result of this short article could be a valuable input to the area of teaching English as a foreign language in Indonesia.*

## Abstrak

*Meskipun mayoritas guru bahasa Inggris di dunia adalah bukan pembicara asli, tidak ada penelitian yang dilakukan terhadap guru-guru tersebut hingga saat ini. Lama setelah hadirnya sebuah penelitian awal oleh Peter Medgyes pada tahun 1994, peneliti-peneliti lainnya baru tertarik terhadap isu tersebut. Ada anggapan yang tersebar bahwa seorang pembicara asli lah yang sepatutnya menjadi orang yang paling tepat untuk mengajarkan bahasa asingnya. Sehubungan dengan asumsi ini, kita melihat sangatlah kecil ruang bagi seorang guru yang bukan pembicara asli bahasa tersebut. Tulisan ini ingin menganalisa perbedaan diantara guru-guru tersebut untuk membuktikan bahwa guru yang bukan pembicara asli mempunyai manfaat yang sama yang harus diakui. Penulis mengharapkan tulisan singkat ini dapat menjadi bahan masukan yang berguna bagi pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris, sebagai bahasa asing, di Indonesia.*

**Key words:** *native speaker (NS), non-native English speakers (NNS), guru.*

## INTRODUCTION

A long time ago, when I graduated from high school, I decided to study architecture. However, I ended up starting my undergraduate degree in a teacher training faculty of English major, which I had never imagined before. From that day on, I knew that one day I would become an English teacher, or perhaps a university lecturer, although it had never crossed my mind before. But, on that day also began the frustration of many non-native English-speaking teachers: the

stereotype seems to be saying that native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) are better English teachers than non-native English speaking teachers (Non-NESTs), and this apparently frustrated me so much. I kept on thinking and wonder if, someday, I would become a good English teacher when, at the same time, the influx of foreign native teachers to my country was becoming a big issue.

The purpose of this article is to see what can be done to counter this stereotype. However, the problem is not that simple. Native-speaking teachers (NSTs) are not always NESTs and non-NSTs are not always non-NESTs. The roles can switch. For instance, when I was at the University of Arkansas, USA, I met a few Americans who were teaching Indonesian language when I was studying English in their country. For me, this was strange because at the same time I was dreaming if could be one of dependable teachers of my language (Indonesian) to my fellow Americans.

From my personal experience, it seems that many people from England, America, Australia, and Canada speak better English than those from other non-English speaking countries. These users give it a distinct identity in every region. To some extent, many experts can accept this view, also argue that nonnative English speakers can also be good English teachers. The purpose of this article is to provide further discussion to the question whether native speakers can be better English teachers than nonnative speakers. In this paper, native English speaker teachers will be called as NEST, while other group of teachers will be called non-NESTs, to simplify.

The advantages and disadvantages of NESTs versus non-NESTs will be comparatively discussed by comparing head to head between NESTs and non-NESTs, non-NESTs and non-NESTs, and NESTs and NESTs. It is expected that the following discussion can give a clearer view about both sides so that judgement can be made about whether one is considered better than the other, or perhaps no judgement can be made.

### **NEST and non-NEST**

Peter Medgyes points out that non-NESTs usually feel uncomfortable using the language they have to teach.<sup>1</sup> Due to this feeling of fear, they usually face the feeling

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<sup>1</sup>Peter Medgyes, "Queries from a Communicative Teacher", *ELT Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 1986. p.24.

of between pessimistic or aggressive. In my opinion, being aggressive is a very serious issue among teachers because non-NESTs have linguistic problems that may cause negative attitude towards their students. In contrast, luckily pessimistic type is believed to be the most common one among students. These kinds of students are obsessed with grammar and pays little attention to pronunciation and vocabulary, and almost none to linguistic appropriateness.

Medgyes furthermore states that by being both teacher and learner at the same time, non-NESTs are driven into a constant state of bad feeling. Obviously, this fact has been part of writer's life experience throughout his English teaching job. Sooner or later, non-NESTs tend to regret having chosen this job because there are not many options aside from having a nervous breakdown and even to think about how to overcome this feeling. This results to a necessity to resign from the job, while another is restricting the use of English; in this regard, to those policy which he or she has learned or misaligned.<sup>2</sup>

The teachers who are aggressive, on the other hand, tend to work on wrong assumptions. These, of course, may result in the production of many types of errors such as phonological, structural and semantic. Medgyes suggested that aggressive non-NESTs tend to be grammar-centered in a way that they believe that knowing grammar means knowing a language, which is very common among teachers of English in non English speaking countries like Indonesia, to exemplify. However, things are even worse due to the consideration that these teachers sometimes broke rules when they were students and then transmit the errors committed to their students when they teach.<sup>3</sup>

Many times, these teachers prevent the use of authentic materials such as radio, video, cassette recorder, etc in order to to cover their weaknessess, which may include their 'weird' accent and wrong stressing of syllables of words, from their students. It is a way to save face in the classroom, as they think. However, pronunciation is not their only obstacle because non-NESTs' vocabulary is another problem. The English language is estimated to have over 400,000 words. The 2005 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, for example, lists 301,100 main entries

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Medgyes, "Queries from ...", p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Medgyes, "Queries from ...", p. 70.

and 616,500 word forms. Their lack of vocabulary mastery is considered one of the biggest issues among non-native teachers while teaching in their classrooms.

Native speakers, on the other hand, have a '*sense*' which can assist them to detect whether the students use right choice of words or not. Most of non-NESTs deal with this issue by using most common words for them so that they don't feel confuse when questions arise from their students. Many times these words have hidden connotations or are out-of-date or slang. In addition, non-NESTs might also have burden in the cultural context of language. The choice of language has to match the social situation of the interaction and so much dependent on the context; linguists agree with this.

Furthermore, Medgyes points out that different cultures view the world in different ways. It is then very difficult for a non-NEST to teach a topic that he is unfamiliar with. It is very common for non-native speakers to use structures that native speakers would not use in the same situations, just in regards of their ignorance. Many experts in the field of second language acquisition tend to agree with this discussion. In short, these teachers might feel bad because they are not able to reach this native command when they try very hard to achieve it.<sup>4</sup>

A very good example to this is shown by the fact that a non-NESTs will most likely not get the top IELTS score (band 9), or the highest TOEFL score at 677. Many of them can easily achieve their 'near' native competence, but not the pure native. Selinker, in his interlanguage continuum, points out that L2 learners are somewhere between 0% and 100% of competence. To support this, Medgyes stated that a non-native speaker's competence is limited and they can only reach near native competence at the most due to the fact that their utilization of English is considerably an imitation from the native speakers. This is the reason why the native speakers always perform better to reach their communicative purposes in their first language.

Coppieters proposes a more flexible finding. She points out that there are many people whose L2 has become their L1.<sup>5</sup> With the exception of the accent, native speakers cannot distinguish them from themselves. She calculates that these

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Medgyes, "Queries from ...", p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> Rene Coppieters, "Competence Differences Between Native and Near Native Speakers", *JALT Journal*, Vol. 63, No. 3, 1987, p. 544.

speakers are at about 90% to 95% in their acquisition along the inter-language continuum. Other authors completely disagree with his view. Greenbaum (in Kachru 1985) argues that, "There is no doubt that non-native speakers can acquire native-like proficiency in English as an additional language, whether they learn English as their second language or foreign language."<sup>6</sup>

He, furthermore, carried out an empirical study to see if there was a difference in competence between native and near-native speakers. Her study showed that there are differences in both groups' intuitions even when some of the near-native speakers did not have a foreign accent. One of the reasons she gave is that adult learners cannot go through the same stages of language acquisition that children do. Coppieters observed that native and near-native speakers have the same proficiency and are equal in their level of language use. She discovered that native speakers and near-native speakers develop a different grammar (or a different perception of grammar) and proposed that a language does not impose a specific underlying grammar on its speakers. This is inline with the writers personal experience during his teaching learning process at the Department of English. Some native teachers even could not explain some prescriptive grammar and often consulted the Grammar for Dummies book in the teachers' room, the book that was not necessarily sophisticated enough for a "language teacher".

When he compares his students to his native English colleagues, a different grammar form used by the Indonesian students and his American and Australian native friends seems to be very obvious although the students have been studying English grammar for many years and the native speakers have never sat in any English grammar classes. In this evidence, cultural sense plays the most important role in creating verbal structure of language.

Now, let us move on the analysis of the relationship between language competence and teaching ability. To begin with, the writer hypothesizes that NESTs and non-NESTs differ in their teaching performance and this might be due to their level of linguistics competence in their L2. From this hypothesis, a research question of whether NESTs perform better in their classroom may arise. To answer

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<sup>6</sup> Braj Kachru, "Standards, Codification and Sociolinguistic Realism: The English Language in the Outer Circle", *English in the World – Teaching and Learning the Language and Literatures*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 11-30.

this question, let us discuss some patterns in the area of difficulties faced by many non-native speakers.

Medgyes points out that NESTs are only potentially superior and that in some cases non-natives do better in certain areas of language use. Medgyes found that every non-NEST has his or her own problems when using English; however, he found some patterns in the areas of difficulties. The most frequent areas are fluency and vocabulary, followed by speaking, pronunciation, and listening comprehension. At the bottom of the list were grammar, idiomatic expressions, appropriacy, intonation, and prepositions. The following explanation is expected to give further detail about these areas of difficulty.

#### 1. Vocabulary

According to the writer's experience, English words, including those of other languages, have different meanings according to the context, idioms, synonyms, etc. This has resulted in difficulties of understanding by their learners, and at last, it resists mastery. For example, the words '*get, achieve, reach, obtain, and earn*' have one single meaning in Indonesian, which is '*mendapatkan*'. It will be very difficult for the Indonesians to distinguish the use of these words to their context as the same case does not exist in the Indonesian language. Therefore, there is a risk of misuse of these words by many Indonesians.

#### 2. Fluency

Oral fluency requires many qualities, such as readiness to speak, speech rate, etc, in which non-NESTs are in a disadvantage. Non-NESTs' speech tends to be redundant and clumsy due to the difficulty in finding the right structures at the right time. Many people from certain regions and cultural background may seem to be less fluent in their English speaking when they are not yet ready to speak and, perhaps, not confident enough to say a word.

#### 3. Pronunciation

It is obvious that non-NESTs are marked by a foreign accent that in the worst cases interferes with other people's understanding. The following example of conversation transcript, from the writer's experience, gives a clear overview about this issue.

Driver : "Excuse me officer, can I **bark** here?"  
 Office : "Yes, sure! This is America, so you can bark everywhere!"  
 Driver : "???"

The illustration shows a misunderstanding that appears from the conversation between a driver, who is a student from Saudi Arabia, and a policeman, who is a native speaker of English. The driver assumes that he says everything correctly and politely in regards to English grammar. However, he does not realize that he phonetically misplaces the sound '**b**' and '**p**' when saying the word '**park**'. Perhaps, he does not realize his mistake because the letter '**p**' does not exist in Arabic. On the other hand, the police officer shows a complete understanding to the drivers question without realizing that he had listened something else.

#### 4. Grammar

Grammar is the favorite field for non-NESTs although a lot of them show hatred to the learning of such rule and formula. Grammar is said to be more concrete and more learnable than vocabulary, which in many instances is correct. Many university professors are more flexible to non-native speakers' writing errors than of those made by native speakers, suggesting that non-native students may not be held. In the writer's opinion, based on experiences with many language teachers and professors when he was doing his graduate study in the United States, non-NESTs are much stricter with grammatical and spelling errors made by their students (non-native speakers) than NESTs, who are more concerned with communicative competences.<sup>7</sup> In regard to this case, a question might arise: how would a native speaker most likely react if corrected by a non-native speaker? In my opinion, based on my personal experience, native speakers become very ashamed and defensive if corrected by a non-native speaker. I believe that this is due to the beliefs that, with or without a teaching degree, NESTs would always feel better than non-NESTs. The NESTs would be superior due to his or her better language competence. In short, non-NESTs usually go with standard rules, while NESTs will most likely follow what they think is correct for them. In other words, NESTs are

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<sup>7</sup> Janopoulos, Michael, "University Faculty Tolerance of NS and NNS Writing Errors: A Comparison", *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 1.2 (1992), pp. 109-21.

more aware of the correct use, but non-NESTs are more aware of structural patterns and of language-learning processes (Reves and Medgyes, 1994).<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, Lederer (1981) points out that non-NESTs tend to consider morphological mistakes rather than pronunciation and syntax, on which NESTs place emphasis. The reason is that word order is a structural pattern that NESTs learn subconsciously; they take it for granted. However, even highly educated native speakers, who were not educated in linguistics, would not know how to explain word order in English. Take a look at the following two sentences (adapted from Lederer's example):

- [1] He got in to his bedroom sleepy
- [2] He sleepy got in to his bedroom

The native speaker can automatically say that the second sentence does not make any sense for them due to its syntactic arrangement. But, no one can guarantee whether NESTs can clearly explain every single part of the structural pattern of that sentence. So far, we have not yet been able to decide which type of teachers perform better in their classrooms. To help lead us to a final conclusion, The following points show us where a non-NESTs is better than a NEST:

First of all, Non-NESTs share things in common with their learners and can serve as imitable models of the successful learner of English. This is very important to give students ideas that one does not have to be born in an English speaking country in order to learn how to speak English. They can see that their non-native teacher(s) have been, are still, and will always be learners of English. In contrast, the NEST cannot be a model because he or she inherits English as a first language and does not have to learn English as a second language. There is a given assumption that native speakers represent the model teachers of a language as they have a better command of fluent, correct language forms and are more conversant with the cultural appropriateness of a language. Most recently, an increasing number of voices have questioned this very ideology.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, effective strategy of teaching is usually performed by Non-NESTs. Because the non-NEST is a teacher and a learner at the same time, he or she

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<sup>8</sup>Phothongsunan, Sureepong, and Suwaranak, Kasma, "Native and Non Native Dichotomy: Distinctive Stances of Thai Teachers of English," *ABAC Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2008, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup>Robert Phillipson, *Linguistic imperialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

has unconsciously developed learning strategies that can be useful to his or her learning. This can then be brought to the teaching of his or her students, who share things in commons as the learners of English as a second language. On the other hand, NESTs may not be able to have this. Moreover, Non-NESTs can provide learners with more information about the English language, but unfortunately NESTs find language acquisition as an unconscious absorbance.

In many cases, Non-NESTs are more able to anticipate language difficulties. According to Larsen-Freeman and Long, it is estimated that between 23% and 51% of the errors that occur between two languages are due to the transfer and interference from L1.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, a non-NEST can definitely take advantage from this condition, whereas NESTs do not really have this experience.

Non-NESTs, additionally, can be more sensitive and understanding. As non-NESTs are also learners themselves, most likely they are still struggling with English and this makes them more sensitive and understanding with their students' problems. In many cases, this condition accounts for a flexible learning environment where a teacher usually acts as a partner to his or her students. Students, as a consequence, learn better from such teachers.

In regard to language being spoken, Non-NESTs can benefit from sharing the learner's mother tongue. In a monolingual setting, for instance that of Indonesian speakers teaching English in Indonesia, their mother tongue can be used as a bridge of communication. For example, if a student asks what the word 'cart' means, it will be very easy for a native teacher to explain the meaning of the word in English. But the students may have a chance of misunderstanding the word as a 'trolley' or 'wagon' instead. In this case, it would be easier for the Indonesian non-NESTs to use the students' language and translate the term as 'kereta' because it can save much time, fortunately. However, this may not be applied in all conditions since many experts argue about the weaknesses of grammar translation method.

### **Non-NEST and Non-NEST**

If we compare non-NESTs among themselves, the non-NEST with higher proficiency in English would most likely be the better teacher. Therefore, the most

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<sup>10</sup>Diane Larsen-Freeman and Michael Long, *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition*, New York: Longman Inc., 1991.

important professional duty for non-NESTs is to improve their command of English as much as possible. According to the writer's experience after many years of teaching English, there are a number of obstacles encountered by English teachers in order to achieve this target. The following discussion will give brief explanation about this issue:

a. Time limitation

Everyone agrees that learning a language takes a long time. Even after spending a long time learning a second language, no one can guarantee that someone will be able to speak a new language fluently. However, everyone would agree that spending ample amount of time combined with high motivation of learning will considerably improve in one's language ability.

b. Fossilization

In linguistics and second language acquisition (SLA), fossilization refers to the often-observed loss of progress in the acquisition of a second language (L2), following a period where learning occurred, despite regular exposure to and interaction with the L2 and regardless of any learner motivation to continue. The best way to avoid fossilization and acquire a high proficiency in English is to live where the target language (TL) is spoken.<sup>11</sup> The more frequent a non-NEST has contact with native speakers, the more chance they have to improve their English even when the native speakers use *foreigner talk*. However, Reves and Medgyes add that that frequent contact can also have a negative effect in that non-NESTs can become aware of their deficiencies and become more critical and, as a consequence, lose their self-esteem and confidence.<sup>12</sup>

## NESTs and NESTs

Among native speakers, there are no differences in L1 competence. In their case, NESTs have to try to minimize their personal weaknesses in order to improve their quality. Medgyes believes that if a NEST is at the same time a learner of a

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<sup>11</sup>Moussu, Lucie, and Llorca, Enric, "Non-native English-Speaking English Language Teachers: History and Research", *Journal of Language Teaching*, Cambridge University Press, Vol. 41, No. 3, 2008, pp. 315-348.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Medgyes, "Queries from a Communicative Teacher", *ELT Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 1986.

foreign language, the drawbacks can be counterbalanced.<sup>13</sup> In a monolingual setting where, for instance, an American NEST is teaching English in Indonesia, it would be very important for him or her if he or she could speak a little bit of Indonesian language. This will help him or her in the classroom, not only in using students' L1, but also in improving the NESTs' knowledge of their own language.

One of the writer's colleagues, who is an exchange English teacher from Ohio, USA, admits having this condition in her classes. When she first arrived and taught English at Syiah Kuala University, she got problems transferring her teaching materials to students because they were at their very basic of English and she could not speak any Indonesian words. Throughout the time, she learned more and more Indonesian words and it productively helped her improve her communication with her students. Therefore, although a NEST is very proficient in his or her first language, a little understanding of students' L1 is very helpful in teaching.

## CONCLUSION

In my opinion, it is as incorrect to say that native teachers are always better than a non-natives, as to state the contrary. It is very dependent on the situation of teaching and the subjects. However, the ideal school is one which has a good balance of NESTs and non-NESTs. One group can complement the other in their strengths and weaknesses. In addition, any kind of discrimination against non-NESTs should be avoided in foreign language teaching.

I would like to extend this idea further and include both groups. An example of discrimination against NESTs comes to my mind. In many schools, English-teaching positions are exclusively reserved for local teachers. I think this is as wrong as the attitude of the private exclusive language schools that are only interested in attracting students by campaigning that they have many native speakers on staff. In my opinion, it would be ideal to have a balance number of native and non native teachers, or at least one NEST available in each school. I think that non-NESTs could take care of the low level students and children, and leave the high level students to their NEST colleagues, or those non-NESTs who

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<sup>13</sup> Susan M. Gass and Larry Selinker, *Second Language Acquisition*, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001, p. 56.

have higher proficiency. Furthermore, we can also see that many private language schools use the word *native speaker* as their promotion value without paying attention to their teaching and academic qualifications. In many cases, any native speakers will be hired by the schools although they don't have any qualification in language teaching such as TESOL certification.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it is clear that employers are more concerned about the English proficiency of the applicants than with their teaching ability. So, I think the concept 'English teacher' should be changed in these cases to 'English instructor'. To meet the parents' needs, a number of private schools and language institutions hire many native speakers of English (NTs). They are believed to teach English "better" than the non-native teachers (NNTs).<sup>15</sup>

A proper example of a good balance between NEST and non-NEST is what has been implemented at Syiah Kuala University Language Center. Here, both native and non native teachers, most of whom are exchange scholars from English speaking countries, work collaboratively in their teaching. While native teachers learn many cultural issues about teaching foreign languages to Indonesian students, their local colleagues absorb meaningful language inputs from them. Teaching in this condition helps both groups of teachers develop their knowledge and teaching experiences significantly.

For this discussion, ideal teachers could be divided into two sides: the ideal NEST and the ideal non-NEST. The ideal NEST would be the one who could minimize the six advantages of non-NESTs aforementioned previously. It is especially important that the NEST learns the students' first language. On the other hand, the ideal non-NESTs teacher is one who has achieved a near native proficiency of English. I think we all agree that the higher the non-NESTs' proficiency level of English, the less self-conscious, hesitant and insecure they will have in teaching. However, I disagree with the idea to bring an English environment into another country. A non-NEST who has lived for a long period of time in an English speaking country may have assimilated, to a certain extent, the TL culture. He or she would be in a suitable position to transmit to his or her

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<sup>14</sup> Nelly Martin, *the Jakarta Post*, October 29, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Nelly Martin, *the Jakarta...*, October 29, 2011.

students his or her perceptions about the TL culture (whether they are right or wrong).

Culture and language are so closely related that they cannot be separated one from another without destroying the whole. However, non-NESTs have to be made aware of their own advantageous potential as language teachers in comparison with NESTs, in order to help them assume a more favorable self-perception. These teachers should be fully supported to develop their teaching quality at the maximum level. To put it in a nutshell, I should pinpoint that a significant exposure is one contributing factor to successful language learning, among others. However, viewing native English teachers as the only agents who can do such a task may not be reasonable.

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