ΛΌΓΟΣ

THE IDEA OF A "NATIVE SPEAKER" IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Luchenko Olha[1], Doronina Olha[2]

1. PhD in Professional Education,
Research fellow at the Department of East Asian Studies Faculty of Arts
Comenius University in Bratislava, SLOVAKIA
Associate professor at the Department of Foreign Languages
for Professional Purposes, School of Foreign Languages
V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, UKRAINE
ORCID: 0000-0002-2844-0441

2. PhD in Professional Education,
Associate professor at the Department of Foreign Languages
for Professional Purposes, School of Foreign Languages
V.N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, UKRAINE
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-3470-4172

The concept of a native speaker has become a topic of intense debate in language research, with scholars increasingly questioning its validity and its association with "native speakerism" within foreign language teaching—the belief that native speakers are inherently more effective language teachers than non-native counterparts. This perspective often elevates native-speaker teachers as ideal due to their presumed superior linguistic competence and cultural authenticity while marginalizing non-native-speaker teachers. Such bias fosters discriminatory practices in hiring, resource allocation, and classroom roles. Additionally, researchers argue that the term's ambiguity perpetuates stereotypes about behavior, experience, and identity, leading to negative consequences. Consequently, they recommend abandoning the term "native speaker" and adopting alternative frameworks to describe language proficiency and usage [1].

A native speaker is not only seen as someone who speaks the language as their first language. For instance, an English native speaker, according to Medgyes (1999), is an individual born in an English-speaking country who acquires English during childhood, speaks it as their first language, demonstrates native-level proficiency, produces fluent speech spontaneously, and possesses an intuitive sense of linguistic correctness [10].

The concept of the native speaker as the ideal language teacher is quite problematic, as the term itself is fraught with ambiguity and inconsistencies. While traditionally tied to birthplace and monolingualism, these criteria fail to account for the diverse linguistic realities of individuals who may grow up in multilingual environments, relocate during childhood, or speak a language at home different from their place of birth. Furthermore, the assumption that native speakers are inherently better teachers ignores the complexities of language teaching, where skills such as pedagogy, empathy, and cultural adaptability play a crucial role. Ultimately, the idealization of native speakers is neither a reliable nor fair measure of teaching effectiveness, calling for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of teacher competency in language education [9; 4].

A study by Reves and Medgyes (1994), based on questionnaire responses from both native and non-native English-speaking teachers (NESTs and non-NESTs, respectively), found that many non-NESTs reported experiencing an "inferiority complex due to the defects in their language proficiency." This finding highlights NESTs' primary perceived advantage—their superior English language command. Additional advantages attributed to NESTs included using "real" rather than "bookish" language, employing diverse materials, adopting flexible teaching methods, tolerating errors, avoiding or minimizing the use of students' first language, maintaining a casual demeanor, and assigning less homework. Conversely, non-NESTs were perceived to have realistic expectations of students, address genuine needs, and demonstrate greater commitment and empathy. When asked whether NESTs or non-NESTs were better teachers, responses were nearly evenly split, with almost half of the participants choosing "both." This suggests that NESTs and non-NESTs each bring unique strengths to the classroom and can be equally effective in their own ways [13].

Moussu's (2002) study on students' reactions to non-NESTs revealed a generally positive perception among ESL (English as a second language) students. Initially, 68% of the students believed they could learn English equally well from a non-native speaker as from a native speaker, and 79% expressed admiration and respect for their non-NESTs. Additionally, 84% of the students anticipated a positive experience in their classes with non-NESTs. However, Korean and Chinese students were more likely to express negative feelings towards their non-NESTs compared to other students. Over the course of the semester, students' perceptions of their non-NESTs became increasingly positive. For example, when asked if they would recommend the non-NEST to a friend, only 56% said "yes" at the beginning of the semester, but by the end, 76% responded affirmatively. This suggests that exposure and time with non-NESTs helped to shift students' attitudes, reinforcing the idea that their perceptions of non-native teachers can evolve positively over time [11; 5].

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Japan, one of the most monolingual countries in the world, faces significant challenges in fostering foreign language proficiency, particularly in English. The limited exposure to languages outside of Japanese has long contributed to a narrow linguistic environment. Japan's approach to English language education remains deeply influenced by native speakerism, prioritizing native English speakers as the ideal language instructors. This ideology is perpetuated by institutional policies and cultural perceptions that equate nativeness with linguistic superiority and cultural authenticity.

Initially, Japan only employed native English speakers as assistant language teachers until 1997, when the government expanded recruitment to include non-native speakers [12; 2]. This change reflects Japan's recognition of the need for a more diverse teaching workforce to meet the growing demand for English proficiency in a globalized world.

The implications for future research emphasize the differences in instructional language usage between native and non-native speaker teachers, particularly in the context of increasingly multilingual and multicultural classrooms [7]. The growing trend of multilingualism in foreign language acquisition is becoming more pronounced. Even students currently facing wartime challenges continue to actively promote foreign language learning through various innovative approaches [3].

This shift in multilingual practices has fostered the adoption of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in foreign language teaching, especially for high-context languages such as Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Arabic [6; 8].

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