

Duckling? No, Swan!

Non-native Teachers Teaching Spoken English to Non-native Learners

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Abstract

English has been accepted as a global language. Users of English as a second language have outnumbered the native speakers. David Crystal gives the statistics which say that second/foreign language users of English are in the range of 1000 million, whereas the native speakers total not more than 400 million (Crystal, D 2004). As a result, teaching of English has acquired greater importance in the 21st century. The goals of teaching English have acquired new dimensions. In this context many issues and questions arise in teaching English, especially in teaching spoken English because a major part of communication transpires through the spoken mode.

Non-native speakers learning to speak English from native speaker teachers in the English environment get a lot of support. But non-native teachers teaching and testing spoken English to non-native learners in a second language context is very challenging. The teacher has to take several decisions like which model to adopt – RP or American or the non-native variety. If a non-native variety is adopted, which one? In the multi-lingual context the teacher should also be aware of the mother tongue in the learners' English. Besides this, the decision about the importance to be given to accuracy and fluency gains relevance in the context of communication in English. Other considerations are the availability of readymade materials and the teacher competence in filling the gaps if suitable materials are not available. Sometimes the problems include the learners' reluctance to accept the non-native teachers.

The paper discusses the principles and issues involved in teaching spoken English. The paper argues that teaching spoken English by non-native teachers to non-native learners in multi-lingual context is more challenging than teaching other skills. The author's experience in teaching spoken English to undergraduates in Eritrea and Yemen and also students from various countries studying at the English and Foreign Languages University, and how the challenges are met would be discussed.

Keyword : Teaching method, spoken mode, transpires, principles, adopt.

NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS

There is a general agreement that those who use a language as their mother tongue are called the native speakers of that language and all other speakers are called non-native speakers. Today, English is spoken by about 400 million native speakers. Of whom about 240 millions are Americans. The British, Irish, Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians and South Africans make up most of the others.

The most poignant summation of what it means to be a native speaker of a language, Joseph J. Lee says, is offered by Kourtizin(2000).

‘English is the language of my heart, the one in which I can say easily express love for my children; in which I know instinctively how to coo to a baby; in which I can sing lullabies, tell stories, recite nursery rhymes, talk baby talk. In Japanese, there is artificiality about my love; I cannot express it naturally or easily. The emotions I feel do not translate well into the Japanese language, and those which I have seen expressed by Japanese mothers do not seem sufficiently intimate when I mouth them.’ (Kourtizin 2000, p.324 as cited in Lee J.J)

Juxtaposed with Kourtizin's claim to English let us consider the short poem by Kamala Das, a creative writer in India where people learn English as ‘other speakers’:

The language I speak
Becomes mine
Its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone.

It is half English, half Indian
 Funny perhaps, but it is honest
 It is human as I am human
 Don't you see?

(Das Kamala :*Summer in Calcutta*)

When it comes to the other speakers of English, a distinction is made between those who speak English as a 'second language' and those who speak it as a 'foreign language'. We can say, as David Crystal(2002) explains, that in countries where English is accorded a special status as an 'official' language to carry out the affairs of the government, education, commerce, the media and the legal system, like in Ghana, Nigeria and India, English is learnt as a second language. Speakers have their mother tongues, but they learn English early in schools or in the street. They use English to communicate with people of different communities within the country. In such a situation we can say that English is the second language.

On the other hand, there are countries where English has no special 'official' status nor do the communities use it as a common language of communication, but it is learnt as a foreign language in schools and in institutions of higher education and through self-help materials for special purposes and for international communication. In countries like Indonesia, China, Japan, Brazil, Poland Egypt English is learnt as a foreign language. However, the situation in countries like Indonesia and China is fast changing. More and more people are now motivated to learn English.

The terms 'native' and non-native' speakers of English are very much debated given the acknowledged fact that English is a world language and no one English speaking community, as David Crystal acknowledges, can claim ownership of the language. 'The notion of a generic native speaker has become so diversified that it has lost its meaning'. Even within the countries where English is the mother tongue the texture of the population is changing. Those who speak English as a second language in the USA are thought to number around 12 per cent of the total population and their number is said to be increasing. American society is gradually becoming multilingual/multicultural. The city of New York alone has speakers of around 150 different first languages. Nair, P.B makes a pertinent observation in this context.

'The native-nonnative concept becomes irrelevant here as everyone is a native speaker of his particular variety of English and a non-native of all other varieties... being the monolingual speaker of a language, is the only single feature that guarantees unexceptional eligibility to native speakerhood on its own strength, as the person has no other language to be native of. But this is just another way of saying that in order to be a true native speaker of a language one has to be a monoglot and thus linguistically deprived, compared to the majority of people in the world!' (Nair,P.B in Graddol 2007)

There have been suggestions to substitute the term 'native' with the term 'monolingual English speaker' and the 'non-native' speakers as well as the native speakers of English who speak another language could be referred to as 'bilingual English speakers'. Jenkins J(2000) has a very interesting observation about the terms 'native'.

In the days of empire, the natives were indigenous populations and the term itself implied uncivilized, primitive, barbaric, even cannibalistic(see Pennycook 1998). With the spread of English around the globe, 'native' – in relation to English – has acquired newer, positive connotations. 'Native speakers' of English are assumed to be advanced (technologically), civilized, and educated. But as 'NSs' lose their linguistic advantage, with English being spoken as an International Language no less – and often a good deal more – effectively by 'NNSs' (preferably no longer labeled as such); and as bilingualism and multi lingualism become the accepted world norm, and monolingualism the exception(see Graddol 1997), perhaps the word 'native' will return to its pejorative usage.' (Jenkins, J. 2000. p. 229)

Within the past decade the term 'native speaker' has been deconstructed, partly by recognizing that people are multi-dimentional; the role of native speaker is comparative minor part of one's identity compared to citizenship, membership of ethnic minorities, football fan clubs, social classes, professional groups etc.'(Rampton, 1990 as cited in Cook,Vivian, 2003) It does not take into consideration the many varieties of English spoken in the outer circle countries like Singapore, India and some African countries where English is an official language as well as a language in home in certain communities. Therefore terms like 'monolingual English speakers' and 'bilingual English speakers' have been suggested. The increase in the number of such speakers has been so phenomenal that it prompted David Graddol (2007) to comment on the situation 'The new language which is rapidly ousting the language of Shakespeare as the world's lingua franca is English itself- English in its new global form...this is not English as we have known it, and have taught it in the past as a foreign language. It is a new phenomenon, and if it

represents any kind of triumph it is probably not a cause of celebration by native speakers.' To serve our purpose, however, we can understand that people who learn a language as their mother tongue or first language in the inner circle countries are called the 'native speakers' of that language. All others who learn that particular language are called 'non-native speakers' of that language.

ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE

The growth and popularity of English as a global language has been continuing for over a century. In the nineteenth century English was heralded from Europe to the Asian countries. By the end of the 20th century, learning English has come to be seen as less of an option and more of an urgent economic need. As Graddol, David (2007) puts it, 'English learners are increasing in number and decreasing in age.' There are several statistics available about the foreigners using English. The most accepted survey is David Crystal's. David Crystal's survey reveals that the number of other language speakers learning English is three times more than those who speak the language as their mother tongue. This also means that people belonging to several different mother tongues use English as a lingua franca. This has necessitated a fresh look at whether the language facilitates the users to use it as a common code globally. 'Language' as Lado (1965) puts it, 'in its most common pervasive, representative and apparently central manifestation involves oral-aural communication.'

While communication can be carried out smoothly in the written mode when it comes to speaking the language several questions and issues of intelligibility arise. This is because of the natural phenomenon called mother tongue influence on the performance in the second language. Determining a standard variety for the other speakers of English to follow has its own problems because of the variety that exists in the native speaker English. The second issue pertains to two kinds of English language learning situations. In some countries like Ghana and Nigeria it is the 'official' language and is used in the society as a main language in use. Whatever their mother-tongue they use English for communication. In India the language is given the status of 'associate official' language. English is used in legal, trade, commerce, science and technology. Apart from India there are other countries like Pakistan, Singapore, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines which count English as the colonial legacy. We can say that English is fast becoming the lingua franca in Asia.

Among the countries like where English has no official status but is learnt as a foreign language, in countries like China, as David Crystal (2002 cited in Graddol 2007a) puts it, 'there has been an explosion of interest in the English language in recent times'. The reason for the enormous motivation to learn English in these countries is because of its dominance as the language of international mobility and communication, outsourcing work, and business. Today, though computers, internet and news media have become multilingual, English remains the preferred language for global reach. As David Crystal puts it, 'it is not the number of mother-tongue speakers which makes the language important in the eyes of the world..., but the extent to which a language is found useful outside the original setting.' (Ibid). If we look at the world tourism sector, 74% of travelers move from one non-English speaking country to another non-English speaking community. This, as Graddol, David (2007) suggests, necessitated 'a large demand for either foreign language learning or the increasing use of English as a lingua franca.' Countries like Malaysia made basic proficiency in English a requirement for all foreign employees. Similarly, countries like Mongolia, Chile, South Korea and Taiwan are planning bilingualism with English being one of the languages.

In this context we can perceive four possible situations where spoken English is taught:

- i. Native teachers teaching native learners (normal)
- ii. Native teachers teaching non-native learners (not so common across the world now)
- iii. Non-native teachers teaching non-native learners (common)
- iv. Non-native teachers teaching native learners (rare)

The third situation is the most common situation in the present context. Graddol, David (2007) acknowledges that 'the non-native speaker providers of ELT services elsewhere in Europe and Asia will create major competition for the UK.' He also says that global English is still a transitional phenomenon and the native-speaker norms are becoming less relevant as English becomes a component of basic education in many countries... Asia, especially India and China probably now holds the key to the long-term future of English as a global language.'

Given this background, many issues and questions arise in teaching spoken English. Some such questions are:

- What is the priority given to pronunciation in teaching spoken English?
- When and how should we teach pronunciation?
- At what level should segmental features be taught?
- Is drilling of individual sounds and patterns effective?

- Do the learners transfer the accurate sounds to connected speech?
- Can we 'teach' the more subtle dimensions of pronunciation like rhythm and intonation?
- Do the course books and other materials reflect the change in approach?
- Have the techniques and methodologies changed over the years?
- Are we comfortable with the evidence of learners' native language in their spoken English?
- How much of the mother tongue influence is acceptable?
- Is it necessary/possible to acquire native like pronunciation by second language learners?

A large number of these issues are addressed by researchers.

TEACHING SPOKEN ENGLISH IN NON-NATIVE CONTEXT

Approaches to the teaching of English have changed significantly during the past few decades. The emphasis has shifted from accurate production of individual speech sounds to communicative aspects of connected speech. The recent shift in the emphasis on communicative aspect could be attributed to two factors:

- a) the adoption of communicative approach to language teaching
- b) the role and importance of English the world over as a result of globalization.

That there cannot be ONE way of teaching spoken English to speakers belonging to different mother tongues is more true than not. This point comes out very clearly in what David Nunan says about methods as a whole. "It has been realized that there never was and probably will be a method for all, and the focus in recent years has been on the development of classroom tasks and activities which are consonant with what we know about second language acquisition and which are also in keeping with the dynamics of the classroom itself." (Nunan, 1991). What Nunan speaks about is more true about teaching spoken English than any other skill.

Douglas Brown H (in Richard J and Renandya 2002) discusses twelve principles, which, he says, are widely accepted theoretical assumptions on which classroom practice is grounded. One of them is the native language effect. The native language of learners will be a highly significant system on which learners will rely to predict the target language system. This is the reason why learners of English as second language do not 'hear' the 'actual' sounds spoken in the target language but 'approximate' them with the nearest sound in their native language. This factor contributes to the positive and negative transfer which has effects on the production.

TEACHING OF PRONUNCIATION

Teaching spoken English has two aspects to it:

- i. pronunciation (segmental features)
- ii. fluency (supra-segmental features)

i. Teaching of pronunciation is inevitable as accuracy contributes to intelligibility. Arguments against teaching pronunciation as Rodney H Jones (in Richard J and Renandya 2002) puts it, rely on two assumptions: a) critical period hypothesis b) pronunciation is an acquired skill. However, a look at the history of teaching pronunciation reveals an emphasis on 'teaching' pronunciation and Rodney H Jones' survey has shown that a conscious behaviourist way of teaching pronunciation over the past few decades. "The more pronunciation teaching materials have changed, it seems, the more they have stayed the same." (Stone, R H in Richard J and Renandya 2002)

Both accuracy and fluency are important and both are inter-related because intelligibility and communication are two sides of the same coin of spoken English. However, the question of which should supercede the other and which should receive priority is a decision the teacher should take.

One need not teach phonology only in the clinical environment of language laboratories using decontextualized situations. There can be more than one technique to teach pronunciation. 'In order to become a competent speaker and listener,' writes Pennington (1996), 'a language learner needs to attend to not only the strictly mechanical, articulation aspects of pronunciation, but also to the meaningful correlates of those articulatory features in the immediate linguistic context, as well as the larger context of human communication'. Bradford (1998) organized her course according to discourse functions rather than the traditional phonological categories. Maley (1987) Gilbert (1993) attempted to teach rhythm and sound through poetry and songs. Several others attempted to teach sounds through lexical/grammatical contexts and reading tasks. Jones R.H. (in Richard J C and Renandya 2002) argues that 'the influence of learners' native language on their pronunciation is not really stronger than on other areas of language use, but simply more noticeable to the casual observer.' Further he claims that in teaching of pronunciation now 'contrastive analysis has given way to the more sophisticated equivalence classification, whereby

learners approach a new sound system by mapping it into their L1 sound system, using existing categories where similarities exist and creating which posits that certain features are inherently more difficult than others, regardless of the learners' language backgrounds.'

Historical survey shows that almost always the model used is that of native speakers. However, in the present context of increase in non-native speakers learning English three aspects need to be considered while teaching pronunciation. a) sociological factor b) psychological factor and, c) needs of the learner. We have to consider whether the second language learners would like to identify with native speakers or would like to retain their own cultural and social identity. The psychological factor includes the learners inhibitions and fears. The third factor is the need of the learner in learning the second language. Rodney H Jones (ibid) says that the 'learners' reasons for learning a second language and the uses they plan to put the language to can have an effect on how native like they may want or need to sound. Learners who expect to have a large amount of interaction with native speakers in business or professional contexts, for example, will have different needs and expectations from learners who plan to use the language primarily for communication with other non-native speakers.' (ibid.p. 184). For example, in India at present the Call Centre operators are trained to acquire an American accent for they deal with a large number of American clientele and they are required to identify themselves with their clients.

TEACHING OTHER ASPECTS OF ENGLISH SPEECH

Apart from pronunciation, there is another aspect of teaching spoken English; the supra segmental features like stress, syllabification, grouping words into thought groups and intonation. Gilbert J.B.(2008) calls this 'rhythm and melody'. She calls them road signs that help the listener follow the intensions of the speaker. She uses these two terms to include *prosody* which deals with syllabification and stress and unstressed syllables and *intonation*. Further she says, 'Unfortunately, when English learners speak in class, they are typically not thinking about how to help their listeners follow their meaning. Instead, they are often thinking about avoiding mistakes in grammar, vocabulary, and so on.'

Besides, native like speech in second language situation takes time, more often it cannot even be achieved. 'Few can achieve native like proficiency in oral communication.' 'Even if they can utter words and sentences with perfect pronunciation, problems in prosodic features such as intonation and other phonological nuances still can cause misunderstandings or lead to communication breakdown.' (Kang Shumin, in Richards J and Renandya 2002, p.204-205). Julie Herbert says 'All ESL learners want to be understood by others, but not all will want to sound like native speakers' (Julie Herbert in Richards J and Renandya 2002. p 189). She demonstrates with detailed examples how to focus on global aspects of speech. She recommends different approaches for adults and young learners. Adults could be given explanations of concepts involved while young learners could be taught in ways where gestures etc. are involved.

Julie Herbert recounts two examples of teaching spoken English in Non-native situation. She reports four steps involved in the procedure. Step 1 discusses the context built to teach stress and intonation. Step 2 diagnoses problem areas. Firth's diagnosis profile is used for this purpose. Steps 3 and 4 involve selecting the content and incorporating phonology in ESL lessons. She then discusses the procedure which involves three stages: review, perception and production.

TEACHER COMPETENCE

One pertinent question is whether the teachers are equipped enough to teach spoken English and whether the methodology has changed in line with the changing needs. There are two divergent views about the teacher competence. Widdowson thinks that native speaker teachers are by and large equipped with knowledge only in a 'privileged' intuitive sense, and with pedagogic competence only to a 'rudimentary' degree. By contrast non-native teachers know the 'subject' English, in an explicit rather than intuitive sense by virtue of having learnt it as a foreign language themselves, therefore, their pedagogic credentials are more credible. Martin Parrot on the other hand feels native speaking teachers are avid language learners and analysts and researchers of their learners' languages and linguistic strengths and weaknesses in learning English. Lee Jessica informs that the native speaker fallacy has been challenged by many scholars who assert that nonnative English speaking teacher can be successful, ideal teachers because having undergone the process of acquiring English as an additional or foreign language enables them to be more aware of their students' needs.

Teachers can use their own experiences as L2 users and build strategies when they teach. As Cook,V (2003) says 'Native speakers were formerly teachers who spoke with authority because of their ownership of the language; now

non-native teachers are authentic sources of knowledge about what it is like to be an L2 user.’ Andy Kirkpatrick, Professor at Hong Kong Institution of Education has a stern warning about the teacher competence desirable in the context of globalization. ‘In today’s complex and globalizing world, well-trained, multilingual and culturally sophisticated teachers are needed to teach learners of English. It is time for those involved in the ELT profession to resist the employment of untrained native speaker teachers.’ (in Graddol 2007 p.121.) In an article in NNST Newsletter an interesting account by Rashi Jain illustrates the identity as well as the competence of nonnative English speaking teachers.

As my few months in the United States had already shown me, I was perceived as a nonnative English speaker by the general populace. I had also found through some first-hand experiences and my readings of the literature that the “nonnative English speaker” tag carried with it expectations of lower proficiency in English and lesser legitimacy as an English language teacher, and many people subscribed to the fallacy that the ideal teacher of English is the native speaker of English...I would let the idea remain in the classroom by frequently legitimating myself as an English language user, sharing with the students that I spent most of my life in India, speaking English as it is spoken in India, and that I went through my own set of struggles to adapt to linguistic and cultural differences after coming to the United States, and that the process is ongoing. (Jain, Rashi)

Further, when the question of the intelligibility of non-native English speaker’s pronunciation is concerned an effort to attain international intelligibility can be attempted.

However, I would explicitly tell the students that although English is not my first language and I am a nonnative English speaker, I see myself as a legitimate English language user, and that my goal as I adapt to life is not to strive to speak like an American but to be understood by anybody who speaks any variety of English. I believe that the students appreciated and saw values in these strategies. ... These strategies helped me build the students’ confidence in their ability and legitimacy to use English in their daily lives, as they learned it. (Jain, Rashi. *ibid*)

As Jenkins says ‘Since it is in their pronunciation that the existing and emerging second language(L2) varieties diverge most from each other linguistically, it is arguably this linguistic area that most threatens intelligibility. This is the area, therefore, that most demands attention if international communication is to be successfully promoted through the English language as the trend continues into the new century.’ (Jenkins, J 2000 .p.1). Further in the context of international communication native speaking teachers’ privileged intuitive knowledge becomes largely irrelevant but the privileged knowledge of the non-native teachers gain through their own experience of learning L2 and their background in L1 and their membership in the international community provides them with distinct advantages of dealing with the phonological knowledge systems, the intelligibility criterion and classroom pronunciation models. Moreover, the native speaker accents may seem too remote from the people the learners expect to communicate with. A study by Graddol (2007) reveals that many countries which are aspiring to go bilingual are looking up to English teacher from bilingual countries to help them in their task rather than to monolingual native-speakers of English. This trend has become more pronounced since 2005 when in the 11th meeting of ASEAN in Kuala Lumpur ‘ the Indian Prime Minister proposed setting up Centres for English Language Training in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam to equip students, civil servants, professionals and businessmen with adequate English language and communication skills. A report by IANS news agency quoted officials as saying: *The tools and idiom in India are what this region would be comfortable with compared to more sophisticated teaching aids, not to speak of difficult to understand accents that would come from core English-speaking nations.*’ (*ibid*)

SETTING UP GOALS

Lee.Jessica has a practical suggestion to make, ‘...instead of focusing on the elements that is out of control of language learners and language teachers, such as the definitive element of what a native speaker is and accent, teachers as well as learners should focus on the elements that are achievable...We should attempt to set the goals for our learners to more attainable goals; not goals which are nearly impossible, if the most irrefutable definition of a native speaker is that he or she acquired the language in childhood and continues to use it.’

One suggestion is to incorporate notions of ‘teachability’ and ‘learnability’ into pronunciation teaching. Some phonological features like nuclear stress, as Jenkins says, can be categorized as ‘teachable’ because of the clear cut generative nature of their rules, and others like pitch movement and weak forms as ‘learnable’ outside the classroom with a good exposure, because of the complexities involved. It makes good international sense for the phonological needs of the majority L2 speakers to be prioritized. In the first place teachers need to be made aware of the role of

pronunciation in intelligibility in international interactions in English and of the phonological features centre to such intelligibility. A neutral variety can be attempted where intelligibility really matters like in aviation. Here it is pertinent to remember the news that on 13 November 1996 the Saudi Air Boeing 747 aircraft collided with Kazakh TU 154 Cargo aircraft on the skies of Charki Dadri, Haryana in India killing more than 350 people. It was reported that the accident was because of the Soviet pilots' not understanding the Air Control's instructions in English. This may be an extreme case of a fatal accident due to lack of communication skills in English. But it is worth taking note of in the context of international intelligibility. In other contexts attempts at neutral variety, though commendable, need not be insisted on as it is unrealistic to expect the L2 learners to completely erase the L1 effect.

On the other hand keeping the international communication in view it is more realistic to focus the pedagogic attention to those items which are essential in terms of intelligibility. Hockett (1958 as cited in Jenkins.J 2000) suggested working at the existence of a common core among the L1 dialects of English. The sociolinguist Bell finds the proposal appealing: 'in spite of the variability of speech, the high degree of mutual intelligibility between different varieties of mother tongue English...seems to imply the existence of some underlying shared system' (Bell 1976. *ibid*). This idea could be extended to the L2 learners and a core could be provided to them keeping intelligibility and acceptability in view. Such a core which would promote mutual intelligibility could include the following items:

- i. The consonants
- ii. Vowels(long and short)
- iii. Syllabic structure and clusters
- iv. Strong, weak, and reduced syllables
- v. Word and sentence stress
- vi. Intonation patterns

Some other fine native-like features in the phonology of the L1 speaker which do not come in the way of intelligibility could take a secondary in the pedagogy. Gimson had made an attempt at developing an artificial common core by simplifying the RP phonemic inventory. So the shift of focus should be from 'who you are' to 'what you know'.

In India, till about 50 years ago native speakers taught English to Indians. The first generation English speaking Indians tried their best to emulate their English teachers in speech as well as manners. Then came a generation of teachers as well as learners who debated whether English should be taught at all in India and tried to shake the roots of ELT in India. However, English has become the language of communication among the educated. While the teaching of grammar and other skills have followed the changing needs teaching of spoken English is still treading an uncertain path like it is happening in the case of other countries where English is the second/foreign language.

The present generation of teachers who are trained to speak English with RP as their model are successful in attaining what is called the 'neutral variety' which does not have very strong mother tongue accent, intelligible yet is distinct from British or American at the same time. This is identified as the 'Standard Indian English'. These teachers teach learners who belong to different mother tongues within the country as well as those who belong to other nations. Indians also go on overseas assignments to teach English. The strategy best adopted by these teachers is to attain global intelligibility. A two-pronged approach is adopted: i. keep RP as a referral point for pronunciation

ii. Eliminate gross features that interfere with intelligibility.

For this, ample opportunities are given to understand and practice the common core features for intelligibility. Secondly, identifying the gross L1 interfering features like substitution of /p/ with /b/ in Arab speakers or /f/ with [ph] by some Indian speakers. Some features like substitution of /θ/ with [tθ] and [ð] are tolerated as they do not grossly interfere with intelligibility. Task-based approach is adopted to provide learners opportunities to shed inhibition and practice speaking. However, the aim has always been to develop communicative competence in the speakers.

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