Self-perceptions of Non-Native English Speaking Teachers of English as a Second Language

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While I was completing my MA TESOL at Portland State University, a non-native speaker (NNS) of English remarked that during her studies in Japan, her English teacher told her that there was a hierarchy for English teachers: the best teachers are trained native speakers (NSs); the second best teachers are trained non-native speakers; the third best are untrained native English speakers; and the worst are untrained non-native English speakers. After hearing this, I sought to understand why some individuals – both native and non-native English speakers – felt that native English speakers might automatically be considered better teachers. As I continued with my quest to better understand what both NSs and NNSs had to offer the field of TESOL, I realized that I had found an area that I wanted to research.

I examined the self-perceptions of non-native English speaking teachers (non-NESTs) of English as a Second Language (ESL) regarding their teaching behaviors. Three non-NESTs from Oregon institutions participated in my study. They did not perceive themselves as having the stereotypical teaching behaviors of non-NESTs. In general, the participants cited cultural factors and theories about language acquisition as reasons for non-stereotypical behavior. These findings suggest that categorical comparisons should not be made about non-NESTs, especially those who have been trained and are working where non-stereotypical behavior is the norm.

Ownership of English

English is no longer a language that is used primarily for communication between native speakers, but rather one that is used internationally for a variety of purposes. As a result, linguists and English teachers now refer to "World Englishes" (Kachru 1985). As more emphasis is placed on this perspective, traditional views on what constitutes a speaker of English are also changing. Some professionals in TESOL (Widdowson 1994, Norton 1997), argue that ownership of English is not limited to only those who are native speakers, but is available to all speakers of the language.

Traditionally, to be a true speaker of a language, one needed to be native-like. In order to judge whether one spoke like a native speaker, one would then need to be able to define what a native speaker is. Various authors have pointed out how difficult it is to create a list of characteristics of the native speaker or even to state how to determine who counts as a native speaker (Liu 1999, Medgyes 1999, Davies 1991, Kramsch 1997).

Resistance to Non-native Speaker Authority in Teaching

We now see that if English belongs to those who use it, the standards within the Inner Circle (the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand) can no longer be applicable to all varieties of English, and therefore deviations from the norm should be accepted and not regarded as deficiencies simply because they come from a non-native speaker (Kachru, 1992). Unfortunately, this idea is a difficult one to establish due to the strong feelings that are currently held about the superiority of the NS and Inner Circle varieties.

This is especially true in English language teaching, where studies have shown that some feel a NS norm should be followed (Friedrich 2000, Tsui & Bunton 2000). Some international Master's degree students who have felt confident about their teaching ability have expressed numerous concerns about various aspects of language and cultural competence (Polio & Wilson-Duffy 1998). The NNSs who become ESL teachers need to address the issues of competence that may follow them throughout their career in the field.

NEST/non-NEST Dichotomy

The NEST/non-NEST dichotomy includes a number of differing characteristics (Reves and Medgyes, 1994). The behaviors listed in Table 1 below are based on those described by Medgyes (1994, 1999). This article draws on two of these areas: own use of English (e.g., NESTs use real language while non-NESTs use "bookish" language), and attitude to teaching culture (e.g., NESTs supply much cultural information and non-NESTs supply little cultural information).

I examined the self-perceptions of non-NESTs regarding their teaching behaviors to see if the non-NESTs that I encountered fit the description given by Medgyes. The research questions were as follows:

1. What are the non-NESTs' perceptions of their teaching behaviors?

2. What is the relationship between the non-NEST's perceptions of their teaching behaviors and stereotypes of those behaviors?

3. If the non-NESTs' perceptions do not fit the stereotypes of teaching behaviors of non-NESTs, what experiences have contributed to their non-conformation?

Overview of Participants

Three teachers participated in this study. All the participants were female. Each participant had a different native language (L1), with differing home cultures in Europe. They had between six and 40 years of experience

teaching English. Their total length of stay in the U.S. ranged from 2.5 to 51 years, although not all of that time was consecutive for all of the participants. Two of them spent a year in the U.S. as exchange students. All of them first experienced the U.S. before becoming adults. The participants have taught either survival English or academic English, or a combination of the two.

Participant 1: Elizabeth

Elizabeth first experienced the U.S. through an exchange program when she was in high school. She then returned to the U.S. about a decade later as an adult, and has lived here since 2001.

Participant 2: Mary

Mary came to the U.S. as a teenager with her family. Although she has returned to visit her native country, she has lived in the U.S. since 1950.

Participant 3: Laura

Laura first experienced the U.S. through an exchange program when she was in high school. Afterwards, she returned to her native country. Feeling dissatisfied in her native country, she left after one year and came back to the U.S. Although she visits her native country, she has lived in the U.S. since 1976.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a written questionnaire (see Appendix for sample questions) and an interview with the teachers. The statements in the questionnaire about teaching behaviors were adapted from Medgyes (1999).

The follow-up interviews were based on the responses to the questionnaire and provided me the opportunity to explore the reasons behind any non-

Table 1	
NESTs	non-NESTs
Own use of English Speak English well Use real language Use English confidently	Speak English Use "bookish" language Lack confidence in their use of English
Attitude to teaching culture Supply much cultural information	Supply little cultural information
Perceived differences in teaching behaviors between NESTs and non-NESTs (based on Medgyes, 1999)	

conformity with stereotypical non-NEST behaviors. The study also explored the subjects' general teaching attitude and attitude toward teaching language. Various themes that emerged in the interviews were also examined. The focus of this article is on behaviors regarding own use of English and attitude to teaching culture.

Own Use of Language

All three participants perceived themselves as individuals who speak English well, use real language, and use English confidently. They did not identify at all with the stereotypical behaviors of non-NESTs, which are that they speak English poorly, use "bookish" language, and lack confidence in their use of English. A major factor involved in their language acquisition seems to be their integration into U.S. culture through early contact in their teen years and their subsequent acceptance of U.S. culture.

Elizabeth's Self-perceptions

Elizabeth described her desire to learn about U.S. history and culture and not dwell on the history of her own country. During the interview, I asked Elizabeth why she feels that she speaks English well and uses real language. The main factors that she discussed were positive feedback from others and motivation to learn English.

Long before she began teaching, Elizabeth had a successful experience as an exchange student here in the U.S. She felt that this success had helped her with learning English well. Elizabeth was always interested in learning languages, and the warm reception she received from her host family and classmates added to her desire to work on her English skills. When she was asked if it had been easy for her to learn English, she gave the following reply:

> I think maybe it was for me because I've always really been into languages…. [W]hat certainly added to it was that I was an exchange student and I had a wonderful host family and they were really an incentive to me…. I identified with my host family a lot, …I identified with a lot of things in the U.S.

> *They did not identify at all with the stereotypical behaviors of non-NESTs*

Elizabeth's ability to identify with her host family and host culture created a safe space in which she could improve her English skills.

Not only did her host family welcome her, so did the students at her school. She joined an international club that consisted of both international students and American students. They did many activities together, and this positive feedback helped her transition into U.S. culture.

In addition to external sources, Elizabeth had an internal factor for her English study: motivation. Elizabeth described how her level of motivation has affected her:

> I worked on my accent for one thing and I was…very motivated to learn languages…. And I still do that… when I read the newspaper or when I hear something on TV… let's say a political speech or something and I… catch something and I'll write it down and look it up because I just want to improve all the time.

In general, Elizabeth had positive feedback from others and strong motivation. These two factors led to her desire to remain in the U.S. and improve her English to a point where she feels confident when speaking.

Mary's Self-perceptions

Some of Mary's perceptions of her own language use matched those of Elizabeth, but she gave additional factors involved in the development of her teaching behaviors. There were several that she discussed: her love of English; her hope to escape the atrocities of Europe; her desire to fit in with U.S. culture; and her belief that speaking English well will help her students to understand her.

First, she first gave me the following reason as to why she feels that she speaks English well and uses real language:

> I have made a special effort to make that true…. I came to this country at thirteen, being fairly limited in my English although I had started learning English …at least by kindergarten or the first grade. I majored in English…in school, and it was my big love.

I made a deliberate and overt…effort to be very fluent in English and I actually have a better vocabulary than most native English speakers.

For Mary, her love of English was a catalyst for improving her English skills with such deliberation that she feels extremely confident about her use of English.

I then asked Mary what factors were involved with her moving to the U.S. at a young age, and how that affected her adjustment. She then described that time in her life:

All teenagers want to be a part of whatever is present in their lives…at the moment…and I was no exception to that. I wanted to cast off all of the ugly war[s]…because I was born during all the revolutions…in Europe. Franco was taking over as dictator of course in 1938, and Mussolini was doing his worst as were Hitler and Stalin. So it was a big mess…Guernica…that's what my childhood looked like and so by the time we managed to get out of that mess and get to the United States I was very eager perhaps more than most teenagers to cast away anything other than what was really…fitting in, being one of the group…one of the kids. And of course my English at that time was British English…. I started learning English at a very early age and came to this country speaking…English a little bit differently and with a different accent than most of my peers so I worked on that as well. I haven't been quite as successful with the accent as I have been with everything else otherwise my English is as perfect as it gets.

As Mary illustrated, her early years were filled with unpleasant memories, and she longed for a way to escape them. She also hoped to fit in with her peers and become "one of the group." By focusing on her use of English, she was able to turn her attention on something that did not have negative associations and that would help her become accepted more readily by her peers.

> *her early years were filled with unpleasant memories, and she longed for a way to escape them*

Laura's Self-perceptions

In general, Laura's saw her behavior in ways that were similar to one or both of the other participants. She explained how developing from a teenager into an adult affected her language development:

I developed as an adult in the English language…. I feel there is a shift that…when you're monolingual you really don't realize though but when you go from one country you're a child or a teenager and then you develop, you go beyond the teenage years and you become an adult. Things shift and you become more yourself. And so the person you're able to express in that language is the person you're going to be with, yourself, for the rest of your life. And so I became who I am in English so I'm very comfortable with it.

For Laura, both her language and her personality were evolving at the same time, and the connection between becoming an adult and being able to express what that meant affected her positively.

Before that actual metamorphosis occurred, Laura found herself in an exchange program where she stayed with a dynamic family that welcomed her. As Laura explained,

I was raised in a family where…you don't express yourself…emotionally. And so I came here and the host family I was with was very warm and very open…. And that was really neat.

Just as Elizabeth found a safe environment with her host family, Laura did, too.

Unfortunately, though, re-entry into her native country proved to be a definite challenge: "What was difficult was going back and conforming and not being able to express myself the way I was as an entire person." Laura had reached a point where the words she had acquired in English were now so connected with who she was that she felt compelled to later return to the U.S. so that her identity could once again become complete. Having her identity tied so closely to her ability to express that identity in English seems a major reason why her perceptions of

her use of English do not conform to the stereotypes of non-NESTs.

Attitude to Teaching Culture

Additionally, all three teachers perceived themselves as individuals who provide cultural information. They did not identify with the stereotypical behavior of non-NESTs, which is to supply little cultural information. The participants view culture and language as being closely related, and they believe that the teaching of culture facilitates language acquisition.

Elizabeth's Self-perceptions

During the interview, I asked Elizabeth to further elaborate on her self-perception. Her response was as follows:

> I think teaching language is very closely connected with culture. If I give my students material on culture, then there's always something they can relate to because they can compare certain things with their own culture and I totally believe that by looking at aspects of the new culture they will also learn more about their own culture as they look at it from a distance. And I find that a very important process…as part of language acquisition being part of a culture…. [U]nderstanding between cultures is one part of one very important aspect of teaching languages. Just teaching a language does not help you look at a culture from a different perspective. You need to supply language material, you need to supply the cultural material and trigger topics or give them insight that they can talk about that they can relate to. That's basically what I do and why I do it.

From this, it appears that Elizabeth is giving three important reasons for her supplying cultural information to her students: one, it promotes understanding of the student's own culture; two, it promotes understanding of the target culture; and three, the bridge created by understanding the two cultures helps facilitate language acquisition. For Elizabeth, the teaching of language necessarily includes the teaching of culture.

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Mary's Self-perceptions

Regarding her attitude toward teaching culture, Mary responded "neutral/don't know" to both the statement "I supply much cultural information when I teach" and "I supply little cultural information when I teach." Yet when I asked her to discuss how she supplies cultural information, she described a teaching behavior that did not conform to the stereotype of non-NESTs. To begin with, Mary shared her belief of how culture and language are intertwined:

> Cultural information is part and parcel of what we do…. [L]anguage in use is culture in use. I mean I think there's no way you can…separate culture from language…. [Y]ears ago there were all sorts of rote kinds of ways and repetitious ways that we taught language and…because the students had brains…they did make learning out of it but it was sure a dumb way to teach…. [W]e don't make it so difficult for the students anymore…all good teachers include…cultural elements in what they're doing because that's what makes language real and useful.

Mary gives an important reason for supplying cultural information to her students: it facilitates language acquisition by creating a realistic learning environment. Interestingly, this idea of supplying cultural information to facilitate language acquisition is one of the same reasons that Elizabeth gave for supplying cultural information in her classroom.

Laura's Self-perceptions

Laura described her teaching of culture as being "in context." She gave a description of how she might approach holidays, such as Valentine's Day, which usually occurs on a day when class is held: "We talk about…who celebrates it and what people do here and what they do in their country, …what they didn't do in their country. We…have this activity for varying levels." Culture, in this instance, is a way to draw the students out and encourage participation since the students are able to talk about something they are familiar with.

Besides using culture as a way for students to practice the language, Laura also uses it as a way to

help them be more successful in their navigation through U.S. culture when they step outside of the classroom. Laura shared how this aspect helps her students. She said that she can teach them what is "formal and informal" and "what is acceptable with certain people and not acceptable with others." She asks the students to call her by her first name since she calls them by their first name. Laura shared how this cultural information is important in the workplace:

> They're not going to call their boss Mr. or Mrs. …. If they did they'd be… looked at as someone who's not understanding the cultural aspects of the fact that you need to call people by their first names unless otherwise indicated. You know they have to know those things otherwise it sets them apart.

For Laura, cultural information is essential for her students, so she supplies it for them.

Summary of the Findings

This study indicates that not all non-NESTs of ESL conform to teaching stereotypes. Therefore, it seems unadvisable to use sweeping generalizations when describing teaching behaviors of non-NESTs, especially those who have been trained and are working in sites where non-stereotypical behavior is the norm.

Most notable in the participants is their unanimous positive perceptions of their own use of English. They all agreed or strongly agreed on their questionnaire that they speak English well, use real language, and use English confidently. They also readily gave reasons for those perceptions in the interview.

Finally, there were a few recurring factors that could have contributed to their non-conformity to teaching stereotypes. With regard to their use of English, a strong theme was a desire to fit into U.S. culture and an early exposure that encouraged such a fit. Another theme was their motivation to learn English. A major influence on their attitude toward teaching culture was a belief that culture and language cannot be separated, and that cultural learning facilitates language acquisition.

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These contributing factors suggest that the participants were able to overcome the stereotypes regarding their own language acquisition by their ability to become a part of U.S. culture. They have embraced the concept of culture and language as inseparable and therefore exhibit teaching behaviors that contextualize activities and that reinforce the belief that language acquisition is facilitated by the presentation of cultural material.

I have used Medgyes' (1999) descriptions of the dichotomous behaviors of NESTs and non-NESTs as a basis for the behaviors in my study. The results I have found differ from those of previous studies (Reves & Medgyes 1994, Árva & Medgyes 2000). There are some possible reasons for this discrepancy. First of all, each participant was exposed to American English and American culture at a young age. Secondly, they were exposed for a longer period of time. Although it is unclear at what age his participants were exposed, none were exposed for longer than a year and a half. These factors are important to note because they may have been what influenced their language acquisition and, therefore, their perceptions of their use of English.

Implications for TESOL

Applications for Teacher Educators

The results of this study clearly demonstrate that not all non-NESTs conform to stereotypical teaching behaviors. Therefore, teacher educators should question the practice of describing NESTs and non-NESTs in dichotomous terms and should avoid promotion of such stereotypes. For example, teacher educators should avoid deliberately grouping individuals according to native speaker or non-native speaker status in the classroom.

Additionally, this study suggests that effective non-NESTs may be able to facilitate language acquisition through supplying appropriate cultural information. All three of the participants described how they themselves were able to incorporate the target culture into their own identity. Therefore, teacher educators may want to look at additional ways of addressing cultural issues so that future teachers can truly understand the powerful connec-

tion between culture and language. For example, future ESL teachers in the U.S. will need to be equipped with information like that suggested by Laura–the use of first name rather than last name in business contexts–if they want to succeed in getting a job themselves.

Applications for Teacher Supervisors

Teacher supervisors should be aware when hiring non-NESTs that effective non-NESTs may not conform to stereotypical teaching behaviors. Non-NESTs should not necessarily be hired merely to teach grammar classes or other classes in which a non-NEST is viewed as one who has superior knowledge. Non-NESTs should also be considered for teaching positions in which they can prove their ability to teach items in context or classes that are traditionally reserved for NESTs, such as pronunciation or listening/speaking classes.

Applications for Teachers

This study shows that teachers do not necessarily fit into the dichotomous categories that describe teacher behaviors. Instead of accepting these ill-fitting labels, teachers should examine their own self-perceptions and make informed decisions about the kinds of teaching behaviors they currently exhibit and the kinds they wish to embrace. Rather than falling into the either/or fallacy, teachers can view these behaviors as being on a continuum and that the behaviors may fluctuate depending on the class, students, experience, and a myriad of other reasons. For example, in a class of students who share the same L1, a teacher can use L1 to explain important course information or to contrast grammatical points such as syntax. However, in that same class a teacher can choose to answer a student's L1 question in English.

Additionally, non-NESTs should not limit themselves to teaching classes that are traditionally given to NNSs; they should request teaching new courses that are outside of their regular assignments. NESTs would also do well to support non-NESTs who may be struggling against being pigeonholed into a certain type of class. For example, NESTs and non-NESTs could alternate teaching certain courses. Furthermore, rather than one teacher being assigned to teach one class, two teachers could be assigned to team teach two classes, thereby allowing both NESTs and non-NESTs to collaborate more effectively.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

The study only addresses the NNS ESL teachers' perceptions of their behaviors, which may not reflect their actual behaviors. Although the participants gave examples to illustrate some of their points, those examples are being filtered through the teacher rather than coming from an outside observer. Future research might incorporate observations of the participants in addition to their self-perceptions, in order to compare the two.

Furthermore, this study examined only three non-NESTs, which will not reflect the perceptions of non-NESTs as a whole. Studies with more participants are needed. Additionally, since all the participants came from Europe, it might be useful to look at non-NESTs from numerous countries and multiple continents. It would also be helpful if male non-NESTs were included in a future study.

Finally, this study only addresses ESL teaching situations. It would be useful to examine how non-NESTs perceive their teaching behaviors when they are in EFL contexts. This would be especially helpful since the conclusions drawn in this study related so much to acculturation, which may not be a factor if a non-NEST is teaching in his native country.

Conclusion

Although the dialogue regarding NESTs and non-NESTs is far from over, the conclusions of this study should be of interest to those who want to better understand speaker identity. People do not fit into neatly labeled categories, so the desire to sort and file ESL teachers by their NS status needs to be suppressed.

Interestingly, when I asked each participant what kind of teacher would be successful in their type of situation, the answers varied greatly. Some behaviors were suggested, but they were not the ones listed in this study. Among those behaviors were the following: setting clear expectations, establishing a clear curriculum, and creating a learner-centered class. Additionally, character traits were suggested: compassion, patience, warmth, empathy, and a willingness to learn. Knowledge of the language was also mentioned, as well as the ability to convey that knowledge. However, the most important response

was stated by Elizabeth and Mary in almost exactly the same words: there is no recipe for a perfect teacher.

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Appendix A

SELECTED ITEMS FROM QUESTIONNAIRE

Part 1

Please answer the following questions as completely as possible.

What is your native language?

What is your ethnicity?

How many years/at what academic level did you study to qualify as a teacher of ESL?

How long have you been in the US?

How many years of experience do you have as an English teacher?

Describe the school where you teach.

What is your motivation to be an ESL teacher?

What do you think accounts for your success as an ESL teacher?

Part 2

Please indicate how strongly you agree with the following statements by circling the number that corresponds to your perceptions:

Strongly Disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; Neutral/Don't Know = 3; Agree = 4; Strongly Agree = 5

	SD	D	N	A	SA
I speak English well.	1	2	3	4	5
I use real language.	1	2	3	4	5
I use "bookish" language.	1	2	3	4	5
I lack confidence in my use of English.	1	2	3	4	5
I speak English poorly.	1	2	3	4	5
I use English confidently.	1	2	3	4	5
I supply much cultural information when I teach.	1	2	3	4	5
I supply little cultural information when I teach.	1	2	3	4	5