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Native and non-native teachers in the classroom

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Abstract

This study revisits the issue of the native versus the non-native speaker in the area of ELT. Its main goal is to examine the teaching behaviour of two groups of teachers, native and non-native, who have exhibited differences not only in terms of their language backgrounds, but also in terms of their qualifications and relevant teaching experience. Although the proportionate role these variables have played is not easy to determine, it may be suggested that the linguistic divergences between the two groups have considerably impinged on their teaching strategies. However, while earlier studies relied mainly upon data obtained from questionnaires, this study supplements these secondary sources with primary ones, that is, it also examines the participants' behaviour at chalkface, through a series of video-recorded lessons. Thus, the focus of this study is two-fold: it analyses differences in teaching behaviour between native and non-native teachers on the one hand, and compares their stated behaviour with their actual behaviour on the other. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Native speaker; Non-native speaker; Native speaking teacher of English; Non-native speaking teacher of English; Teaching behaviour; Target language competence; Language awareness

1. Introduction

Most contemporary research in language pedagogy has been led by the principle of 'learner centeredness'. Much attention has been paid to the learning process and the learner, relatively little to the teaching process and the teacher. This study focuses on the teacher, and as such it is a contribution to redressing the balance.

In the neglected area of teacher research, the language teaching profession was for a long time regarded as a monolithic bloc. For various reasons, the mere existence of non-native speaking teachers of English as an entity different from native-speaking teachers was called into question. As a consequence, their specific needs, constraints

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and benefits went largely unnoticed, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of teachers worldwide were non-natives. With the rapid spread of English as a lingua franca, the ratio of non-natives to natives was steadily growing (Widdowson, 1994; Crystal, 1995; Graddol, 1997).

This reluctant attitude towards the recognition of the non-native teacher stems from the fact that its superordinate, the non-native *speaker*, was held in disregard. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the native speaker/non-native speaker distinction was attacked from various quarters. Considered to be a useless binomial, it was to be replaced by new concepts and new terms. For example, Edge (1988) preferred speaking about “more or less accomplished users of English”, Rampton (1990) coined the phrases “expert speakers and affiliation”, and Kachru (1985) offered the use of “English-using speech fellowships” to stress ‘WE-ness’ instead of the ‘us and them’ division (Kachru, 1992). The rancour of the controversy may be epitomised by the title of a book, *The native speaker is dead!* (Paikeday, 1985).¹

Although there are plenty of arguments against the native/non-native dichotomy, and most of them are legitimate on any ground, linguistic, ideological or pragmatic, none of these alternative phrases have stood the test of time. The term *native speaker* as opposed to *non-native speaker* is as widely used in the professional jargon of both teachers and researchers today as ever. But why is this distinction so impervious? The handy, and somewhat cynical, answer is that, as Halliday pointed out (Paikeday, 1985), the native speaker is a useful term, precisely because it cannot be closely defined. Popper (1968) had gone even further when he said that, if physicists had been bogged down in the definitional problems of light, the electric bulb might never have been invented. Davies added that “The native speaker is a fine myth: we need it as a model, a goal, almost an inspiration. But it is useless as a measure” (1995, p. 157).

In any case, it is generally agreed today that membership to one or other category is not so much a privilege of birth or education as a matter of self-ascription (Davies, 1991). Anyone who claims to be a native speaker is one provided that they are accepted “by the group that created the distinction between native and non-native speakers” (Kramersch, 1997, p. 363). However, “more often than not, insiders do not want outsiders to become one of them, and even if given the choice, most language learners would not want to become one of them” (ibid. p. 364). In short, mobility between the two groups is possible but rare.

2. NESTS and non-NESTS

While the native/non-native speaker polemic seems to have abated, research on the special role played by non-native teachers in the teaching/learning operation has been gaining ground. However, in addition to a growing number of

¹ Interestingly enough, the most serious objections to the native/non-native concept were voiced by native-speaking researchers. “Is the native speaker elite deconstructing itself?” Kramersch (1995) wonders. “Are we witnessing a kind of ‘night of the fourth of August’, where native speakers tear off their insignia, abolish their own privileges and call for non-native speaker equal right and prerogatives?” (Kramersch, p. 6)

Such a self-flagellating proclivity is perhaps most manifest in Phillipson’s *Linguistic imperialism* (1992).

articles², only one full-length book, entitled *The non-native teacher* (Medgyes, 1994), has been written on the subject.

In this book, the author claims that native and non-native English-speaking teachers, or NESTs and non-NESTs as he calls them, are “two different species” (Medgyes, 1994, p. 27). This statement rests on four hypotheses:

1. NESTs and non-NESTs differ in terms of their language proficiency;
2. they differ in terms of their teaching behaviour;
3. the discrepancy in language proficiency accounts for most of the differences found in their teaching behaviour;
4. they can be equally good teachers in their own terms.

Table 1
Perceived differences in teaching behaviour between NESTs and non-NESTs

| NESTs | non-NESTs |
|--|----------------------------------|
| <i>Own use of English</i> | |
| Speak better English | Speak poorer English |
| Use real language | Use ‘bookish’ language |
| Use English more confidently | Use English less confidently |
| <i>General attitude</i> | |
| Adopt a more flexible approach | Adopt a more guided approach |
| Are more innovative | Are more cautious |
| Are less empathetic | Are more empathetic |
| Attend to perceived needs | Attend to real needs |
| Have far-fetched expectations | Have realistic expectations |
| Are more casual | Are more strict |
| Are less committed | Are more committed |
| <i>Attitude to teaching the language</i> | |
| Are less insightful | Are more insightful |
| Focus on | Focus on |
| fluency | accuracy |
| meaning | form |
| language in use | grammar rules |
| oral skills | printed word |
| colloquial registers | formal registers |
| Teach items in context | Teach items in isolation |
| Prefer free activities | Prefer controlled activities |
| Favour groupwork/pairwork | Favour frontal work |
| Use a variety of materials | Use a single textbook |
| Tolerate errors | Correct/punish for errors |
| Set fewer tests | Set more tests |
| Use no/less L1 | Use more L1 |
| Resort to no/less translation | Resort to more translation |
| Assign less homework | Assign more homework |
| <i>Attitude to teaching culture</i> | |
| Supply more cultural information | Supply less cultural information |

² For a useful collection of articles, see Braine (1999).

Medgyes (1994) set out to validate his hypotheses on the basis of three surveys, which included 325 participating teachers from 11 countries. Table 1 presents a summary of his findings concerning the teaching behaviour of NESTs and non-NESTs (pp. 58–59).

As Table 1 demonstrates, there were a number of significant differences in teaching behaviour between the two groups. This is not to say, however, that either group was better in terms of teaching qualities. “Different does not imply better or worse,” and this being the case, teachers should be hired solely on the basis of their professional virtue, regardless of their language background (Medgyes, 1994, p. 76).³

Although his sample was fairly large, the author himself warned that caution must be exercised in interpreting the results, since the project was based on questionnaire-elicited self-reports, which reflect a teacher’s *stated* behaviour rather than his or her *actual* behaviour — and there may be a wide gap between the two (Kennedy and Kennedy, 1996). Stated behaviour may be influenced, among other things, by one’s belief system, which “deals not only with beliefs about the way things are, but also with the way things should be” (Woods, 1996, p. 70). Clark and Peterson (1986) argue that “the correspondence between teachers’ espoused beliefs and classroom behaviour is not always high and is moderated by circumstances that are beyond the teacher’s control” (pp. 291–292). This corresponds to the distinction Marton (1981), in a more general framework, made between first- and second-order research, the former concerned with what people actually do and the latter with what they *perceive* they do.

3. Research design

3.1. The research questions

This small-scale ethno-cognitive study analyses 10 video-recorded language lessons and 10 follow-up interviews with the recorded teachers. Its primary aim is to review the differences in teaching behaviour between NESTs and non-NESTs as established in *The non-native teacher*. By combining methods of first- and second order research, the investigation hoped to throw light on the discrepancy between teacher perceptions and classroom realities. More specifically, it aims to answer the following research questions:

What are the differences in teaching behaviour between NESTs and non-NESTs?

To what extent are these differences ascribable to the participants’ language background?

What else may cause the differences?

How do the participants’ stated behaviour and actual behaviour differ?

³ For a more technical description of the NEST/non-NEST distinction, see Reves and Medgyes, 1994.

3.2. *Collecting the data*

The sample had to be restricted to 10 teachers. In addition to budgetary and time constraints, this was due to the fact that the number of NESTs available in secondary schools was very limited. The NESTs and non-NESTs were equally distributed, with one native/non-native pair to be observed and interviewed in each school. It was made clear to every participant that the purpose of the survey was to compare the teaching styles of NESTs and non-NESTs, and that strict anonymity and confidentiality would be guaranteed.

With respect to the five natives, the three male and two female were all British, who came to Hungary on a 2-year contract. Two arrived in September 1996 and three in September 1997. Although all of them had a BA/BEEd degree or a teaching certificate, they were poorly qualified as EFL teachers: prior to their arrival in Hungary they had only completed crash courses in Britain. While two participants had several years of experience in teaching other subjects, the cohort's TEFL experience was limited, ranging between 1 and 2.5 years. To compensate for the gaps in their professional training, however, they were eager to attend conferences and in-service training courses. None of them claimed to speak foreign languages beyond elementary level. Their teaching load averaged 20 lessons a week; with one exception, they also had a few hours to teach outside their school.

The Hungarian cohort, consisting of four females and one male, were all qualified teachers of English; while two were university graduates, three had college certificates⁴ The length of experience ranged between 2.5 and 10 years, the average being 5.6 years. As regards in-service training, two college graduates were studying for a full university degree, two regularly attended conferences and in-service courses, and one had even run workshops. While two participants spoke no foreign languages other than English, three were intermediate-level users of Russian and/or German. All non-NESTs were full-time school teachers, their weekly teaching load varying between 16 and 26 lessons. While two of them had no extra teaching duties, three were teaching another 5, 16 and 20 lessons, respectively, in private language schools, at companies and/or privately⁵

The five schools involved in the study were all secondary grammar schools in Budapest. Two of them were well-established schools in the city centre while the other three were up-and-coming schools in the outskirts, including an English-language bilingual school.

⁴ In Hungary, there are two forms of teacher education: universities, which award degrees, and colleges, which award certificates. Whereas university graduates may teach in any type of school, college graduates may only teach in primary education. Due to the present shortage of English teachers, college graduates are also allowed to work in secondary schools.

⁵ The compulsory teaching load for secondary school teachers is 20 contact hours a week; the participant with 16 hours was a form-teacher, entitled to have a reduced load. However, since it is impossible for school teachers to make ends meet on their salary, they are forced to moonlight. Only those financially assisted by their families can afford to do without second and third jobs. This explains why EFL teachers are usually the least stagnant members of the school staff. Rumour has it that an elderly teacher in a Budapest secondary grammar school went up to young colleague and asked: "Tell me, dear, do you plan to stay long enough for me to try and remember your name?"

Our attempt to homogenize the student sample was only partially successful: the 139 students, aged between 15 and 17, were 9–11th graders; 58% were girls and 42% boys. Group sizes ranged between 10 and 18, with an average of 14 students per group. The number of lessons per week averaged 4.2 for eight of the groups; the two bilingual groups had 20 English lessons per week.⁶ In their teachers' judgment, one group was at beginner, three at pre-intermediate, two at intermediate and four at upper-intermediate level. All the main books being used were standard contemporary coursebooks. (The chart in Appendix A summarises the main points described previously.)

The visits took place in the course of November and early December 1997. Prior to the recordings, the participants were asked to 'teach as usual'. After the lessons, every teacher sat for a 30- to 45-minute-long guided interview, conducted by one of the authors of this paper. The language of the interviews was English for the NESTs and Hungarian for the non-NESTs. There were two, almost identical sets of questions compiled in advance: one for each cohort. The questions focussed on the following points: professional background (including foreign language competence), the native/non-native issue, group profile, and the assessment of the lesson they had taught (Appendix B). Each interview was recorded on an audio-cassette and subsequently transcribed.

3.3. *Analysing the data*

After the data-gathering process, the first step was to analyse the follow-up interviews. After the self-reports had been examined, the results were compared with the results shown in Table 1. Finally, the recorded lessons were scrutinised with the purpose of finding points of convergence and divergence between stated and actual behaviour. It is in this order that the results will be presented and discussed later.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. *Analysing the interviews*

4.1.1. *Competence in the target language*

Not surprisingly, the primary advantage attributed to NESTs lies in their superior English-language competence. Their superiority was said to be particularly spectacular in their capability of using the language spontaneously and in the most diverse communicative situations. A non-native participant argued that any NEST's stock of colloquial expressions, idioms and phrasal verbs was incomparably richer than any non-NEST's. "Natives can answer any questions, even from the area of biology

⁶ In bilingual schools, there is a 'zero year' followed by four 'normal years'. In the 'zero year', the students have 20 English lessons a week so that they can cope with the subjects they are obliged to study in English by the time they begin their first 'normal year'.

or chemistry,” she said. Furthermore, a native participant mentioned that “My presence in itself has a lot of value”- a statement which was corroborated by a non-NEST: “The mere presence of a native acts as a motivating factor.” NESTs commanded respect, because “Students *have to* speak in E when they’re speaking to me, which is like what it would be like if they travelled abroad anywhere [...] In a sense you can throw away all your training and techniques and just be yourself. Being yourself is the central element.” “Natives can say anything,” complained a non-NEST. “They are even forgiven for making mistakes.”

In contrast, non-NESTs were reported to have a faulty command of English. “Because this is a learnt language, it doesn’t come spontaneously,” said a non-native. In spite of the fact that all of them had been to English-speaking countries, with a duration ranging from two weeks to one and a half years, they admitted to having problems with basically every aspect of competence, but especially with pronunciation, vocabulary and colloquial expressions. Their usage was felt to be out-of-date, smacking of textbook language. As a native participant pointed out, “You need to know not just the grammar, but where to use it, when it sounds right, when it sounds wrong, and a non-native speaker has to know a hell of a lot in order to be able to do that.” Inevitably, non-NESTs would pass their mistakes and inappropriacies to their students. As a native observed, “All students say *pullover*. It’s not wrong but the more common word is *jumper*. But *pullover* is easier for students.”⁷ To make matters worse, said a non-NEST, “we mix the two languages indiscriminately while teaching.”

Conscious of their linguistic handicap, non-NESTs took pains to make improvements. The forms of language practice in which they frequently engaged included reading books and magazines, watching films on video and TV, and speaking to English-speaking friends. One participant considered his university studies and another one the act of teaching itself to be the most effective means of language improvement. The non-NEST in the bilingual school noted that discussing professional issues in the staff-room was valuable not only as a form of in-service training, but also as language practice.

4.1.2. Knowledge of grammar

Among the gaps perceived in the NESTs’ repertoire, grammatical knowledge ranked at the top. As one of them lamented, “This is wrong and this is the correct way you should say it, I know, but I can’t explain why it’s wrong or right.” A fellow NEST remarked that “Most native teachers I know never really came across grammar until they started teaching it. So you have to learn it as you go along.”⁸

On the other hand, grammar occupied the pride of place on the non-NESTs’ list. Thanks to both their own learning experience and pre-service training, they claimed

⁷ The self-confidence of this NEST might be a bit shaken if he found out that the British National Corpus contradicts his assumption: *pullover* is in fact more frequent than *jumper*. This also illustrates that the linguistic intuitions of native speakers should not be taken for granted.

⁸ The Hungarian experience suggests that even well-qualified NESTs often have scanty knowledge of grammar and pay little heed to the teaching of grammar.

to have in-depth knowledge of the structure of English as well as a metacognitive awareness of how it worked. This was acknowledged by NESTs as well: “The non-native teacher has learnt grammar and is able to convey that to people very clearly with no wastage, whereas I would have to more often look up to find out what it was I was being asked about.”

The difference in grammatical knowledge was regarded as a major cause of the distribution of work between NESTs and non-NESTs. In four schools in our sample, the natives were commissioned to teach only conversation, usually in one or two lessons a week, whereas the non-natives, being the “chief teachers”, had to deal with everything else, including grammar. Since “I rarely get asked grammar questions, of course I have no idea of grammar,” said a native participant. However, there were other reasons why each NEST had as many as 10 groups to teach without being in charge of any of them. As expressed by a non-NEST: “They shouldn’t take responsibility for a group before they become aware of the needs of Hungarian students, or are clear about language examinations in Hungary.” Another non-native added that “native colleagues don’t get groups because they are not qualified teachers; children sense this.”

4.1.3. Competence in the local language

Another defect in the NESTs’ professional expertise was their lack of Hungarian. With the rights of L1 use in the foreign-language classroom having been reinstated, NESTs with no knowledge of Hungarian felt handicapped: “I can’t explain fully, especially with beginners, and it can be frustrating,” said a native, and another one added: “It must be wonderful to be Hungarian and if students have a problem to explain it in Hungarian.” On top of that, the NEST who only speaks “idiot Hungarian misses a lot, does not realise when students are being nasty or funny.” This may account for the fact that NESTs were reported to be so reluctant to offer error correction. “If natives don’t speak the students’ mother tongue,” said a non-NEST, “they cannot really ‘interpret’ the mistakes the students make.”

The NEST’s inability to speak the local language may also have been conducive to a low level of empathy, an assumption framed by a NEST like this: “Being a native speaker, it is difficult for you to appreciate what the students are going through when they’re learning English.” In comparison, having moved along the same road as their students, non-NESTs “may remember those difficulties from their own learning.” Their level of sensitivity was supposed to be enhanced by familiarity with general educational goals, including curricular and exam requirements. In awareness of their students’ individual goals, non-NESTs said that they were in the habit of designing more realistic and concrete teaching plans and, on the whole, more thorough lessons plans.

4.1.4. Other aspects of professional behaviour

In some cases, NESTs were criticised for their casual attitude: “The native is just making friends with the students,” said a non-NEST. “The students don’t view him as a teacher, but just as a young chap messing about in sneakers.” NESTs were alleged to be similarly lax in setting requirements. “I don’t force anybody to do

anything,” said a native contentedly, only to be rebuked by his non-native colleague: “The students do not feel that they need to prepare from lesson to lesson” — if true, this insouciant attitude may be explained by NESTs being relegated to teaching conversation classes only. In one instance, a NEST’s negligence was so gross that, as a non-NEST confided, her native partner “did not even know that the class was compulsory also for those students who were frequently absent.”

Another characteristic feature was that, except for the teacher in the bilingual school, NESTs were not using coursebooks. This was due to two things, said a non-NEST: “They don’t like them and they feel coursebooks limit their work.” It is a pity, she went on, because “students have difficulties storing photocopied handouts.”⁹ According to another non-native, the NESTs’ permissive teaching style also featured in their reluctance to assign homework and give grades. NESTs “are used as ‘props’ at the school or as ‘status symbols’,” concluded a third one.

Generally speaking, non-natives were found to be stricter teachers, possibly because they had an enhanced feeling of responsibility, as well as an awareness of being “more restrained by school regulations and administrative tasks like giving marks.” In this regard, a NEST voiced a negative view: “A disadvantage of being a non-native teacher is having been brought up in very forced educational circumstances and possibly sometimes passing that on.”

In sum, both NESTs and non-NESTs had mixed feelings about the teaching styles of the opposite group. Their statements would have more face validity if it had not turned out that most participants had in fact little or no direct experience in observing each other’s classes. In the staffroom, too, interaction and collaboration between the two cohorts — except in the bilingual school — was respectively sporadic and loose, perhaps owing to the huge differences between them in terms of their language background, teaching experience, qualifications, lifestyle, professional attitudes, and time constraints. Be that as it may, it is only logical to suppose that most of the views expressed in the interviews were based on a combination of previous experience, hearsay and hunches rather than on hands-on experience.

4.2. *Comparing the results*

In this part of the discussion, the views of our participants are compared with the views shown in Table 1. The area of investigation is the perceived teaching behaviour of NESTs versus non-NESTs.

With respect to English-language proficiency, our study confirmed the assumption put forward in *The non-native teacher* that NESTs spoke better English than non-NESTs. Their superiority embraced all four skills and all areas of competence. There was a great deal of correlation between the two sets of data specifying the NESTs’ linguistic strengths and the non-NESTs’ linguistic weaknesses.

⁹ Even highly qualified natives working in Hungary tend to underuse coursebooks; it is not clear whether this is mainly due to the influence of the ruling EFL dogma, which often discredits coursebooks, an inflated sense of self-confidence, or some other causes.

In like fashion, both studies spelled out the differences in teaching style between NESTs and non-NESTs. With respect to the category labelled ‘General attitude’ in Table 1, most items in the two columns were echoed in our study. Namely, in their capacity as conversation teachers NESTs could afford to be innovative, flexible and casual, as opposed to non-NESTs, who had to apply more middle-of-the-road, consistent and demanding teaching strategies in awareness of certain educational constraints and their students’ needs. Their commitment was reinforced by the awareness of being the sole bearers of responsibility. Having encountered the same obstacles during their own language learning career as their students, they were more likely to empathise with their difficulties; NESTs were supposed to be in the dark about such hurdles.

Most of the specific attitudinal features shown in Table 1 were reiterated in our study. Non-NESTs were said to have more insight into and better meta-cognitive knowledge of grammar; the distribution of work between the two groups in our sample accentuated their divergent foci of attention. As in *The non-native teacher*, non-NESTs were alleged to stick to the textbook, whereas their native colleagues were using a variety of materials. It was also confirmed that NESTs were more tolerant of student errors. While they were better informants of the cultures of the English-speaking world (but certainly of the cultural heritage of the British Isles) than their Hungarian colleagues, they felt culturally alienated in the local environment.

There were two further issues that emerged in our interviews with particular force. One concerned the strong motivational effect the natives brought to bear on their students, by virtue of using English as a genuine vehicle of communication. The students simply had to use English if they wished to interact with their native teacher — this was obviously not the case with their non-native teacher. The other issue had to do with lesson planning: non-NESTs were reported to be more conscientious in their preparation and their plans had more professional relevance.

On the other hand, certain features highlighted in Table 1 were disregarded by our participants. For example, there was no mention of whether our NESTs, too, favoured oral skills, contextualized practice, free activities and group and pair work, as opposed to our non-NESTs, who would be expected to lend more emphasis to the printed word, teaching items in isolation, controlled activities and frontal work. More importantly, while it is clear that the two sources of results bear a good deal of resemblance, there is no way of establishing at this point the degree of correspondence between *perceived* behaviour and *actual* behaviour. The analysis of the video-recordings is designed to shed light on these issues.

In any case, it is reasonable to assume that the respective teaching behaviour of NESTs and non-NESTs is connected with linguistic matters, and at least some of the divergencies perceived between the two cohorts are determined by their divergent language backgrounds. The school principals in our project are likely to have assigned NESTs with the job of conversation classes on grounds of linguistic considerations alone. Such a selection criterion is of dubious value. Considering the NESTs’ lack of EFL training and experience, however, there is no doubt that the principals’ decision was ultimately right.

4.3. *Analysing the recorded lessons*

4.3.1. *NESTs at work*

The four conversation lessons given by NESTs took us by pleasant surprise.¹⁰ Instead of “young chaps messing about in sneakers”, four keen, active and relaxed teachers were observed in control of similarly disposed students. The success of their endeavours may be attributed to several factors.

First of all, NESTs were timetabled to do what they could do best: to use English for communicative purposes. Although they spoke some local variety of British English at almost normal speech rate, the students were able to understand them without undue effort. They were able to express the desired message economically and clearly, but their linguistic advantage over non-NESTs became especially palpable when they were giving instructions.

In addition to serving as ‘perfect language models’, NESTs were rich sources of cultural information, highbrow as well as lowbrow, about any topic around which the lessons were structured: the jury system in Britain, charity projects, the ideal world of John Lennon, and the gimmicks of advertising. Meanwhile, in an effort to build cross-cultural bridges, they kept inquiring about Hungarian traditions, for example, folk art and the local version of Santa Claus. These ‘debating societies’ seemed to bring a welcome break in the students’ daily routine.

Apart from the good choice of topics, the overall success of the lessons was ensured by thorough preparation — contrary to hints in the interviews. Since none of the NESTs were using coursebooks, they designed their own material in the form of newspaper cutouts, posters and worksheets. Students were also required to prepare material for the projects they were going to present. Thanks to meticulous planning, the NEST lessons had a clear structure with activities linked to each other in logical order.

The four NESTs proved to be good facilitators. Untrained they may have been as EFL teachers, but they were well-trained debaters, applying with dexterity the etiquette of agreeing, disagreeing, challenging, hesitating, and so on. They sometimes took up a contrary position just for the sake of stirring debate, but they did not hide their own personal opinions, either. For example, when a boy said that women should not be allowed on the jury, the teacher reminded him that the ancient symbol of justice was a woman. Our general impression was that the NESTs’ professed tolerant views were reflected in the selection of discussion topics as well as in comments such as “John Lennon’s world may not be realistic but still that’s his dream”. Or, when a student said that Nazis should be barred from the jury, the teacher countered that, for all his personal aversion, nobody should be excluded because of their political allegiances. But above all, NESTs were good listeners who showed genuine interest in whatever the students had to say.

The classes had a relaxed atmosphere, with the teachers behaving in an ostentatiously non-teacherly fashion. They discarded several elements of the educational

¹⁰ As mentioned earlier, the fifth NEST was a ‘normal’ teacher in the bilingual school; her lesson is examined together with the non-NESTs’.

culture customary in Hungarian schools, such as formal greetings, calling on shy or reluctant students, or automatically correcting every error. In addition, they were moving a lot between the blackboard and the students, their movement being facilitated by the horseshoe arrangement of desks. During pair and group activities, they often crouched before the student they wanted to listen or talk to, so that their eyes would be at the same level.

Humour was in great abundance in all four lessons. It typically featured in one-liners, like these: “I’ll give you one and a half minutes because I’m generous”; “Earnings, not earrings”; “Unarmed doesn’t mean that he has no arm” (while showing that the arms would not be cut off). On another occasion, the teacher deliberately put up a word with a spelling mistake, and when a student spotted the mistake, the teacher said: “Good, so you are listening!” A few minutes later the same teacher praised the students who had designed funny distractors for a multiple-choice exercise. Exchanges between teacher and student were often of a teasing kind, like this one:

Teacher: We’ll finish this the next time.
Student: Sure?
Teacher: Believe me.

Students were also allowed to crack jokes — it is a pity that most of them were produced in Hungarian.

For all intents and purposes, the NEST lessons were far from being perfect and indeed were rife with professional errors, big and small. Some activities were launched and never finished; the teacher spent an unduly long time with a certain group at the expense of others; after the groups had dwelt on a task for 10 minutes, some were not given the chance to present their project; discussions occasionally dragged on endlessly, stealing the time from other tasks; while one NEST ran out of time, another one ran out of ideas, and so on. Nevertheless, our overall impression was that the NESTs were capable of performing the task for which they were employed: they succeeded in getting their students to talk in English.

4.3.2. *Non-NESTs at work*

Although non-NESTs complained a lot about their language handicaps in the interviews, it turned out that all five of them were fluent speakers of English, two being at what is often called near-native level. Except for one of them, non-NESTs used English almost exclusively during their lesson. This is in stark contrast to the claim voiced in the interviews that a great advantage of non-NESTs over NESTs was their capability of drawing on the mother tongue for assistance. While the teachers themselves insisted on using English all the time, they did not demand that their students should follow suit. The use of Hungarian was most conspicuous during pair and group work — a case of unprincipled leniency shared by both cohorts (Hancock, 1997).

In consonance with the interview data, four of the five lessons were built around some aspects of grammar, yet practice was not dominated by controlled activities; a

vast array of techniques and procedures, including communicative tasks, was applied to teach the structural patterns in context. In other respects, too, the non-NEST lessons were more varied than the NEST lessons, with the main stress falling on the speaking skills throughout.

However, some other results of Table 1 were confirmed. Thus all five non-natives relied on one or as many as four different coursebooks, resorted to more error correction, checked the students' work more consistently and assigned more homework than their native colleagues. As expected, the non-native classes were poor in cultural content: four lessons conveyed hardly any cultural information on English-speaking countries, whereas the concrete facts supplied in the fifth lesson about the British school-system were some 30 years out of date. Meanwhile, it has to be admitted that, as opposed to frequent references to various aspects of Hungarian culture during the lessons held by NESTs, non-NESTs made no attempts at dealing with Hungary.

With regard to class atmosphere, any comparison between the two cohorts would be unfair, because conversation classes are freer by nature. Nevertheless, a congenial atmosphere was characteristic of three lessons out of five. In addition to activities eliciting humour such as charades, tongue twisters and mimes, there were a lot of wisecracks ("I'm like a walking dictionary. I just supply the words"). The same teacher exercised self-irony when he responded to a student correcting him, like this: "You may draw my attention to my mistakes because I do make mistakes." Other non-natives rounded off their classes with cheerful comments, such as "You were great today. I liked working with you." and "Thank you for your cooperation. Have a nice day. See you on Monday." In defiance of a prediction that non-NESTs would keep their students sitting all the time, the students had ample opportunity to move among the desks arranged in a horseshoe shape. Incidentally, the liveliness and conviviality of the lessons held by both NESTs and non-NESTs seem to confirm the assumption that there is indeed a universal EFL culture which transgresses national borders and educational traditions.

In contrast, the remaining two non-NESTs in our sample are suggestive of the survival of a more rigid and autocratic pedagogical attitude in Hungary. These teachers imposed formal discipline, insisting on chorus greetings and formal reporting. Possibly also upset by the video-camera, they both looked impatient,¹¹ especially after realising that they would run out of time. Blaming the students for their flop, one of them escaped into sarcasm: "You're writing these down, aren't you? Of course you are", and "Don't advertise your own personal problems because they're expensive"

At the same time, two teachers deserve a special mention: the NEST from the bilingual school whose brief was to teach grammar, and the non-NEST who had decided to do a conversation class. The trouble with the NEST was that she was unqualified to teach grammar, therefore she relentlessly plodded through the coursebook exercises; she was the only native who adhered to classroom formalities — perhaps in compensation for being a foreigner. With respect to the non-NEST's

¹¹ After several futile attempts to get across the meaning of the word *impatient*, the teacher asked with no feigned impatience: "Now, shall I write *impatient* on the board or not?"

conversation class, as her feeling of frustration grew, she gradually lost all sense of timing and touch with her students. In short, both teachers appeared to be misfits: the NEST might have been more successful had she held a conversation class, and the non-NEST might have done better had she focussed on grammar.

5. Conclusion

The primary aim of this study was to revisit the claims made in *The non-native teacher* (Medgyes, 1994). In order to ensure better validity, the scope of investigation was widened by employing a multiple research design. On the other hand, because of the very limited size of the sample, our findings are tentative at best, and call for replication on larger populations and different teaching contexts. To further investigate the NEST/non-NEST dichotomy, it would be useful to survey countries where, unlike in Hungary, (1) EFL backpackers are not welcome; (2) they may be employed with the proviso that they undergo thorough in-service training; (3) there is a standard system for native/non-native collaboration¹² and so on.

Secondarily, the study searched for matches and mismatches between perceived attitudes and actual practice. While several statements formulated in the self-reports proved to be valid, others were found to be wrong; the observation process also highlighted a number of issues ignored by the interviews. Put simply, teachers' perceptions cannot be used as reliable compasses.

Finally, our study was meant to be a reaction to the criticism levelled by a reviewer of *The non-native teacher*, who said that "the author tends to overemphasize the linguistic deficit of nonnative professionals while neglecting other equally significant factors related to professionalism" (Samimy, 1997, p. 816), probably implying EFL qualifications and length of experience. Our analysis paid special heed to the relationship between language competence and professional expertise.

Nevertheless, there was one inherent methodological flaw that the researchers were unable to remedy. Any research that compares two groups for one variable tries to eliminate all other variables that might distinguish the two groups; failing that, it is difficult to tell whether it is the chosen variable which is responsible for the differences and not another one. As the two groups of participants in our study differed not only in terms of their English-language competence, which was to be the focus of the investigation, but also in terms of their teaching qualifications and experience, the causes of divergences in their teaching behaviour could not be determined with certainty. The only excuse the researchers can offer for this shortcoming is that well-qualified and experienced NESTs were not to be found in Hungarian state secondary grammar schools. For better or worse, this is a telling sign of the situation at the time of the research.

As for the differences in language proficiency, even though all five non-NESTs were fluent speakers of English, they were unable to emulate NESTs on any count of

¹² The JET and the Koto-ku projects may serve as good examples of native and non-native collaboration (Brumby and Wada, 1990; Sturman, 1992)

English-language competence. Furthermore, the very fact that NESTs represented a different cultural heritage greatly enhanced the students' motivation, enabling them to move at the interface of two cultures.

With respect to the differences in allocated roles, four NESTs had been pre-ordained to teach only conversation classes, leaving the lion's share for non-NESTs — this was a wise decision in our judgment. Although Seidlhofer (1996) is right in saying that “There has often been the danger of an automatic extrapolation from *competent speaker* to *competent teacher* based on linguistic grounds alone, without taking into consideration the criteria of cultural, social and pedagogic appropriacy” (p. 69), it appears to be a fair assumption that even untrained NESTs can be used effectively for certain teaching purposes — and not merely as ‘status symbols’.

The differences in teaching style between NESTs and non-NESTs may be best characterised with two comments. At one point, a non-NEST said to her class: “And now I'd like to teach you a tongue twister.” Compare this to what a NEST said in the interview: “Well, there's nothing in particular I want to teach those kids.” Although both intended to teach their students to communicate, they clearly had two different kinds of commission. With tangible chunks to teach, non-NESTs favoured a step-by-step approach. With no such handrails to hold on to, NESTs kept pushing their students along a never-ending path. Hence the researchers' difficulty in making this comparative analysis any more transparent.

In an era of political correctness, one often reads references to classics of the profession. In a plenary lecture, van Essen (1994) reminded us, for example, that “As long ago as 1899 Henry Sweet, quite unequivocally as was his wont, gave the following verdict: trained non-native teachers are better than untrained native ones.” It has taken us a hundred years to realise that the picture is more complex than that. Poorly qualified NESTs can do a decent job as long as they are commissioned to do what they can do best: converse.

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Appendix A

| Gender Qualifications | NATIVE | | | Non-NATIVE | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---|---------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Male BA | Male BBA | Female PGCE | Male Certificate of Further Education | Female BEd | Female College certificate | Male College certificate | Female College certificate | Female University degree | Female University degree |
| EFLTeaching Experience | 1,5 years | 2,5 years | 1 year | 1,5 years | 1 year | 5 years | 2,5 years | 2,5 years | 10 years | 8 years |
| Teaching load at school | 20 | 20 | 20 | 20 | 21 | 16 | 20 | 20 | 26 | 20 |
| Extra teaching | 2 | 7 | – | 4,5 | 5 | 16 | 20 | – | – | 5 |
| Number of students in class | 18 | 15 | 11 | 14 | 12 | 15 | 15 | 18 | 10 | 12 |
| Girl/boy ratio | 8:10 | 13:2 | 4:7 | 7:7 | 5:6 | 5:10 | 10:5 | 14:4 | 6: | 9:3 |
| Year students are in | 10 | 11 | 11 | 10 | 9 | 9 | 10 | 1 | 10 | 9 |
| Language level | upper- intermediate | upper- intermediate | upper- intermediate | upper- intermediate | intermediate | pre- intermediate | beginner | pre- intermediate | intermediate | pre- intermediate |
| Number of lessons/week | 4 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 20 | 4 | 3 | 6 | 4 | 20 |

Appendix B

1. Name:
2. Native language:
3. Length of teaching experience:
4. Qualifications:
5. Do you regularly participate in any form of in-service training?
6. Non-natives: How do you strive to improve your command of English?
Natives: Do you speak any Hungarian?
7. Non-natives: What do you consider to be your strongest and your weakest points in your English language competence?
8. Knowledge of other foreign languages:
9. Non-natives: Length of stay in English-speaking countries/What did you do there?
Natives: How long have you lived in Hungary?
10. Average teaching load per week:
11. What age group do you like teaching, and why?
12. Is there a specific teaching method that you prefer?
13. Other subjects you are teaching:
14. What helped you most to become a professional teacher?
15. Where else do you teach? Other occupations?
16. What do you regard as the advantages of being a native/non-native teacher?
17. What do you regard as the disadvantages of being a native/non-native teacher?
18. In what sense do you think you teach differently from a native/non-native teacher?
19. Is there any organised way of cooperation between native and non-native teachers in the staff?
20. Is there any specific distribution of work between them?
21. If you were the principal of your school, would you prefer to hire natives or non-natives? What is the ideal ratio of natives and non-natives?
22. For how long have you been teaching this class?
23. Standard coursebook being used:
24. Level of class:
25. Short description of class/problems:
26. How satisfied were you with your lesson?
27. What would you do differently?
28. Did anything go wrong in your judgement?

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