

Comment: Twenty Years Later

Editorial: In Defense of Non-Native Speaking Teachers¹

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When our Editor-in-Chief, M. Martha Lengeling, suggested a 20-year-old article of mine to be one of our vintage articles, I was both honored and surprised. The first thing I did was dig out the old article and read it. I must admit that I had almost forgotten it, and as I began reading, I wondered if it would be still valid.

After reading it, I am convinced of two things: (1) I used to write very well, and (2) I still firmly agree with what I wrote. Much has changed since 1995. First of all and to my relief, my 15-year-old son followed through on his English studies and got a doctorate at Imperial College in London. Second, I think I am less of a native speaker now than I was then. I am a “fossilized native speaker”, who has lived more years in my adopted country, Mexico than my native country of US. My English is stuck in a time zone of around 1970. I recently read an article from *The Boston Globe* (Peterson, 2015) concerning the use of the “quotative like”. This phenomena (“I’m like who does she think she is”) was just beginning when I left the US, and now it is considered by linguists to be so common that it will remain a part of American English for a long time. And finally, the topic is definitely current since the problem I saw then about the relative benefits of having a native or a non-native speaker is still being discussed as a number of recent articles published or soon to be published in the *MEXTESOL Journal* show.

I think Mexico is luckier than many other countries as related to this problem. I know the discrimination towards non-native teachers still exists, but compared to many other countries, we are in fairly good shape. Even twenty years ago, non-native speakers were already holding high-level positions in ELT, both in public and private educational institutions, and I think the myth of the superiority of the native speaker as a teacher has become even less accepted, but unfortunately not forgotten, in the last few years. I remember twenty years ago being at a well-respected public university outside of Mexico City, and being told that the “powers-that-be” preferred to hire native Americans to teach their English classes, *even those without any teaching experience at all (let alone English language teaching), over local professors who had degrees or certificates in ELT*. Nowadays, having an M.A. or even better a Ph.D. is a requirement in most institutions to become an ELT teacher at the university level, and more and more non-natives are filling the ranks at public and private universities. In reality, in Mexico the sheer number of English-language students (now even in public schools from kindergarten level), makes hiring native speakers a pipe dream even for the most traditional administrations. Our goal now should be to change English language educational policy so that all teachers, both native and non-native, can reach the highest level of English language proficiency, and have equal opportunities for training, and that their voices continue to be heard at the highest levels of educational administration.

¹ The original article was published in the *MEXTESOL Journal*, Convention Issue, 1995. 19(2).

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In other parts of the world, the myth of the superiority of the native speaking teacher is still the norm but we, the ELT teachers, are very aware that “those who know about teaching English are the least likely to defend or excuse native speaker favouritism in the current ELT hiring policies” (Kiczkowiak, 2015) In some countries such as South Korea, basically the only teachers who are hired are those who are native English speakers. (Kiczkowiak, 2014). Professional organizations like TESOL have had position statements against discrimination of non-native English speaking teachers since 2006. (TESOL, 2006) and the discussion has extended even beyond language discrimination to racial discrimination as well (Kubota & Lin, 2006). Although I am honored to have this article reprinted, I find it a shame that a topic that was controversial twenty years ago is still a “hot topic” today. I am sure twenty years ago I would have thought that in the near future the problem of discrimination of non-native speakers in ELT would have been resolved, but, alas, that is not the case. There is still valuable work to do done in our profession concerning this issue.

Note: I am including a .pdf file with some suggested readings on the topic that were recommended to me by the NEST Facebook group, which I recommend to all interested in the problem.

References

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