

Analysis on Whether Native or Non-Native English Speaking Teacher is Better in TEFL in China*

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Abstract—The population of acquiring English as a foreign language in China is the largest all over the world. More and more native English speaking teachers have come to China to teach the English language since the reform and opening-up policies were launched in China. The issue whether native or non-native English speaking teachers is better in China has been long contested in some studies since then. The article demonstrates some contested notions of the issue in the area of TESL in China in general. It discusses from perspectives such as language competence, qualifications, English varieties and teaching effectiveness of NESTs and NNESTs and aims to offer English language educators and learners insights of their different teaching styles. By clarifying the contested notions, it is able to propose better teaching methods that make the best of advantages of NESTs and NNESTs in TEFL of China [1].

Keywords: *NESTs, NNESTs, foreign language*

I. INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development of globalization, foreign language teachers are working in different countries, teaching language-learners from different backgrounds. And as English is now the critical language all over the world, there are a lot of English speakers teaching English in other countries other than their native countries. Therefore a large number of English speakers are working in the foreign institutions of different levels all over the world[2]. However, a lot of researchers pay much of their attention to the researches of learning process and the English language learners instead of teachers. Not much attention has been paid to the effectiveness of native or non-native English speaking teachers.

EFL is broadly taught throughout universities, colleges, high schools, middle schools, primary schools and even kindergartens in China. Since the first discussions on native and non-native speaking teachers, it has been a broadly contested issue in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in terms of language competence, qualifications, experience, and varieties of English and so on [3]. In the history of studies, there have been preferences both for native English speaking teachers (henceforth NEST or

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NESTs) and non-native English speaking teachers (henceforth NNEST or NNESTs). The article aims to provide both educators and English language learners with insights of teaching effectiveness, teaching deficiencies and learners' needs in the teaching process of NESTs and NNESTs [4].

II. BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

In China the first language school was held by government of Qing Dynasty in order to train some officials for diplomatic missions. In the last quarter of century, education policies of the government were closely related to political, social, economic development of China. Though there were sometimes some policy swings, focus of language education was moved from grammatical, ideological functions to facilitate cultural communication and economic development. Emphasis for English language education was a response to the demand of a well-educated workforce with the rapid modernization since mid-1980s. And in the last decade of 20th century, people all over the world saw the unprecedented progression in the economic, political, cultural, social and educational domains. Therefore, after instruction of English language was written in the syllabuses of ELT in secondary schools during 1990s, the government issued a curriculum outline for primary schools in China in 2001 because Chinese leadership's belief that English competence is a critical factor in quality education. In terms of English teachers qualification, in 1980s, "the teachers had a weak grounding in pedagogy, lacked professional competence for English language, and knew very little about recent developments in foreign language education both at home and abroad" [5]. The main reason for it was that the rapid increasing of English education in the late 1970s and early 1980s of China caused a critical shortage of English language teachers so as to a lot of untrained and unqualified teachers admitted into schools of different levels. However, in the past 25 years, English education has had impressive changes. There have been many in-service programs for English teachers, including long-term and short-term training programs provided by varies of institutions such as teaching training institutions, distance learning colleges, education universities and self-study higher education system etc. Thus

to the year of 2001, more than 85% of English teachers hold decent qualifications that meet the professional requirements.

And according to the official web page of Abroad China, currently China recruits more than 150,000 foreign teachers in teaching English as a second language (TEFL). TEFL has become a huge industry in China. Thus there is a huge demand for English teachers in China for the largest English-learning population[6]. It is believed that China has the largest number of both English learners and English teachers in the world. What's more, the demand for learning English is still very huge now in China. What's more, NNESTs in China outnumber NESTs by an overwhelming margin.

The debate about NESTs and NNESTs is significant in TEFL of China. In the history, there have been preferences for NESTs and NNESTs respectively. Todd and Pojanapunya (2009) assume that although English language learners explicitly express preferences to NESTs, they actually feel more intense warmth towards NNESTs. Learners state that one of the hugest strengths of NESTs is teaching pronunciation, whereas that of NNESTs is their learning strategies. Thus the attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs are "complex with an explicit preference for native speaking teacher, but no implicit preference and warmer explicit feelings towards non-native speaking teachers" [7].

Yet Cook argues that learners in EFL "should be considered as speakers in their own right, not as approximations to monolingual native speakers". Thus English teachers should recognize this situation and combine English language learners' situations and their roles in the classroom, incorporating the teaching goals, using their native language in their language teaching process. It is impossible for both English learners and teachers to give up their reliability on "nativeness" of native speakers soon. However, hopefully it is time to justify the right of learners in EFL to use both their native language and target language in learning. Thus NNESTs and English language learners are "successful multilingual speakers, not failed native speakers" [8].

III. NOTIONS CONTESTED

There are frequent criticism, debates and questions from critical researches about language competence, teaching effectiveness, and varieties of English of NESTs and NNESTs. Contestation about the issue is of particular importance in teaching and learning English as a second language worldwide.

A. *Language competence*

In the context of TEFL, the debates about NESTs and NNESTs as EFL teaching professionals include "the native speaker fallacy, differences in teaching and learning in EFL, students' and teachers' perceptions of native and non-native teacher, English as an international language and sociopolitical ownership of English, the concepts of center and periphery in English language teaching and the role of multilingualism in language teaching and learning, and the sociocultural identity of EFL learners and teachers"[9]. In

those contested issues, undoubtedly the English language "fallacy" and the ideal stereotyped images for NESTs are the most controversial ones.

Vivian Cook (1999) explains that "the indisputable elements in the definition of native speaker is that a person is a native speaker of the language learnt first" [10]. All the other elements are incidental, such as "how well a speaker uses the language" [11]. Cook's definition has been one of the most widely known definitions of a native speaker. Adrian Holliday (2006) defines native-speakerism as a commonly accepted ideology in English language teaching that native language speaking teachers are representations and ideals of western culture and their languages. Students of EFL think the way in which they are taught by teachers whose native language is English will help their learning of language somehow. NNESTs have to build their credibility of language teaching for the only reason that they are not native speakers[12]. In this sense NNESTs could feel injustice and inferiority even in a country where English is a second language to teach such as China. NESTs have the assumed superiority as native speakers of English in TEFL. It is often believed that NESTs could bring some irreplaceable features into EFL, such as authentic language use, pronunciation models, and slang and idioms etc. All of these features can be found quite valuable and effective in language teaching. There is no standard definition for Standard English at all, but it is mostly agreed that Standard English is a learned skill. Real standard variety of English is supposed to be taught from at school, that is, majority of native English speakers are not speaking standard English, and "standard English is only claimed by a minority of people who have the power to impose it" [13].

NESTs are always considered as the gold standard of spoken and written English. In this sense, they are superior teachers because of their innate English language skill. It is perceived that NESTs have good communicative skills, a large vocabulary, and especially knowledge about the native culture. However, they are often seen to have little capacity with grammar and difficulty in explaining complicated language phenomena. Most of them have no teaching experience of EFL and methodology. But English language learners regard them as friendly, energetic, encouraging, and good models to be imitated. Meanwhile the native English could be rather difficult for learners to understand when it is used to explain the language itself.

Compared with NESTs, NNESTs are valued as successful EFL learners and for their own study experience as English language learners. They all have the same experience and process of learning English with their students. However, because of the language background, their oral language skills are poorer and knowledge about native culture is less. But it is believed that NNESTs adhere to EFL teaching methodology and are more concerned with class involvement and assessment. Chinese EFL learner commonly think that NNESTs usually give more after-class assignments, prepare their lessons thoroughly, correct learners language errors in time, and prepare students better for exams. Last but not the least, NNESTs could explain the

complex English language grammar briefly and simply to be understood in their native language, Chinese [14].

B. Qualifications and experience

Wolff (2009) considers that there is no generally applicable recruitment standard for NESTs of EFL in China other than the only requirement that they must be native speakers and have a bachelor degree in some acknowledged discipline. China does not have unified government policies on qualifications and teaching experience of hiring NESTs in any tiers of universities and other school. It is possible to teach English in China even without a college degree. Admittedly some NESTs are highly qualified and experienced in TEFL, however others are not. Mantle (2006) did a research on forty-five foreign teachers from ten universities in a city of Northern China. They found that more than half of the respondents have no relative English Language Teaching or professional training of education. A large number of unqualified native English speaker are employed to teach oral English courses in order to ensure that language learners' exposure and practice in the target language, English. These NESTs are absent in professional training and subject knowledge and talking to English learners are their justified responsibility. Some of NESTs are young graduates from their homeland, English-speaking countries, traveling to explore Asia, especially China, or to further their education in China. In addition to the lack of their proper qualifications, they have little knowledge about Chinese conventions, culture, customs, and history. Let alone Chinese educational system and mores, including students' previous study experience etc. [15]. There are several reasons that contributed to the increasing number of unqualified NESTs in China.

There are institutional demands for number of NESTs at all different levels of education in China, thus they are also a necessary part of teacher numbers. Chinese institutions have sought to import native or even near-native English speakers, foreign teachers or even "perhaps" foreign teachers, to fill in the sufficient number of teachers. There is no specific data available to describe the average level of qualification of NESTs yet, but a majority of them who are currently working in China could not be regarded as professional trained or prepared in other countries. Phillipson (1996) thinks that unqualified NESTs are "potentially a menace", and metaphorically, untrained native speakers are like fish in the water: they could swim at ease in the water, but they do not know how they themselves do it, let alone telling others how to do it [16].

As China has deepened the reform and been actively involved in all kinds of economic activities all over the world, the quality for English education has increasingly higher demand. Since English became a compulsory course in the nine-year basic education curriculum, extended exposure to English language has been growing. Thus both quality and quantity of NESTs have been considerably improved over the years. However, generally speaking, the quality of English teachers of different levels in China is comparatively low and cannot be on a par with demands of English

language teaching. Efforts to develop highly professional NNESTs and to provide them with high quality professional training have been one of the focuses of Ministry of Education in China. Given the recent hotly discussed topic of education equality, in some undeveloped areas, there are still deficiencies in qualified English language teacher because of insufficient resources and investment.

C. China English and Chinese English

There have been critical researches focusing on varieties of English, standing alongside with acceptably acknowledged standard British and American English. In recent years, China English is an emerging variety of English in China and some countries in Asia. Thus Chinese English teachers are supposed to be more qualified to teach the variety of "China English".

British and American English have been accepted as the universally accepted standard of English language for many years. Randolph Quirk (1990) states that there are two types of institutionalized varieties: British English and American English, and there are one or two others with standards rather than informally established, such as Australian English. He thinks the distinction between native and non-native is the most controversial [17]. Over a long period of time, Chinese students have been studying English mostly from their middle school age, some of them even earlier, from primary school age or kindergarten age. What's more, China has the largest EFL population in the world. It is quite understandable people ask that since China is a free and independent country as Britain and America, can't there be Chinese English just as British English and American English? And the same debate is happening to some other non-native English speaking countries, such as India.

There has been a long-time debate about Chinese English and China English in TEFL research field. There are several different definitions for the term of China English provided by different researchers. Kirkpatrick and Xu ((2002) compare these definitions with Butler's five criteria of the native variety of English: "1. a standard and recognizable pronunciation handed down from one generation to another; 2. Words and phrases that express key features of the physical and social environment and which are regarded as peculiar to the variety; 3. A history in the sense that the variety is seen as part of a speech community; 4. A literature written in that variety without apology; and 5. The existence of reference work" [18]. They argue that China English has been exemplified with English-native speakers by Chinese people, but it is still developing within the variety. And many examples show that China English has adopted the pragmatic norms of Chinese language and consequently China English will be accepted as the norm of within China soon. Thus China English is, in the relative researches, based on Standard English language, relating to Chinese culture, and is consistent with Chinese discourse, sentence patterns and lexis. It is considered as a communicative tool as well. Chinese English is defined in this way: "words are ungrammatically strung together, with often inappropriate lexis and probably only a partially comprehensible

pronunciation". China English is different from Chinese English. Linguists' attention has been attracted by China English for many years. Qiong (2004) also demonstrates reasons for using China English as standard: "1. Since there are a lot of things are quite unique in Chinese culture, Other varieties of English are not able to transmit the according cultural references that Chinese speakers of English language will want to express; 2. English speakers in countries of Asia may find China English can satisfy their communicative needs politically, economically and culturally than other varieties of English; 3. China's huge population and economic development indicate that China will be using English more and more, providing the basis from which its own variety of the language may well dominate, due to the sheer numbers of Chinese speakers and foreigners' new contacts with China" [19].

Wang (2015) investigates on attitudes of Chinese university students and teachers towards China English. More than 1500 students and 190 teachers participate in the investigation. The conclusion is that both the teachers and students are reluctant to accept China English as language norm. However, their attitudes diverge in terms of some specific China English features involved in TEFL in universities. Some researchers argue that China English should be integrated into English teaching materials for the inevitable "nativization" of English language as a lingua franca [20]. In this context NNESTs would be ideal English teachers to make China English standard. English language learners, in this way, are able to be exposed to this variety of English and promote the acceptance of it at an international level. Most English language learners in China speak China English because they are deeply influenced by linguistic features of their native language, Chinese. Therefore it is self-evident that NNESTs are more qualified and experienced to teach China English in China. But whether China English could be accepted by language learners in classrooms as a type of Standard English or not is still a long-lasting issue to be discussed.

English language learners' reaction and attitude towards World English are positive. Therefore, they have a higher expectation to be taught by NNESTs. Under the assumption that other variety of English could be accepted as language norms, they may choose NNESTs to teach them English and English cultures in terms of concerned language knowledge and teaching styles. English language learners in China do not have access to the new concept of World English so that they have a blind anticipation for Standard English norms. Therefore, knowledge about varieties of English needs to be taught and spread [21].

D. Teaching effectiveness

Whether or not language nativeness of NESTs and NNESTs is related to their teaching effectiveness is another widely contested notion. If English language nativeness or English competence were the only factor in TEFL, NESTs would be naturally superior to NNESTs. It would be then followed by the conclusion that all the NESTs would be

more effective than any NEST in TEFL whether with or without appropriate language-teaching qualifications.

TEFL is supposed to be divergent with teaching English as a mother tongue in terms of what makes English a foreign language. In other words, what makes English foreign and how English should be taught, as a foreign language, is different from teaching it as a mother tongue. He and Miller (2011) argue that NESTs do not have the experience of learning English as a foreign language, and cannot imagine the situation in which they study English as a foreign language, though NESTs are extremely rich in the experience of speaking it. On one hand, the poor qualified of some NESTs for English teaching in China. On the other hand, the contestation is about whether NNESTs can teach their English-learning students to advanced levels with the non-native English language backgrounds[22].

In the research about native and non-native speaking teacher in Japan and Vietnam done by Walkinshaw and Duongthi (2014), it is found that NNESTs offered more efficient and effective teaching, better preparations for language exams, and much clearer in explanations of problems than NESTs in terms of grammar, exams and problem-solving [23]. And this research echoes with some previous researches on the same topic. According to Medgyes (1992) the statement of "the more proficient in English, the more efficient in classroom" should be modified in this way: "the more proficient in the English language learners' mother tongue, the more efficient in the classroom" [24]. For most English language learners in China, the sole criterion to test English competence is examination, especially College Entrance Examination. Thus from learners' perception, it is more efficient and effective to learn the target language by mother tongue in terms of preparation for examinations.

Gurkan and Yuksel (2012) found in their research that NESTs are superior in teaching pronunciation, target culture and having positive attitudes to their classes and NNESTs are displaying solid grammar knowledge of English language [25]. In English classes of NESTs, learners can solely communicate with the target language of English, which is native to the teachers, thus they are more encouraging and motivating in this perspective.

From my personal observation as a NNEST myself, English language learners in China have some characteristics in their English study, such as fear of losing face, unwillingness to participate in discussions or speak in front of a lot of people. Those characteristics prevent them from practicing the language well to some extent. Most English teachers in China have common understanding that Chinese students are deeply influenced by Confucian culture, in which they are supposed to be passive recipients instead of active seekers of knowledge. And most non-native teachers think that they are very respectful to their teachers and usually hard working. In this sense, NESTs can easily sense and understand learners' feelings and embarrassment which are hard to mention.

Ustunluoglu (2007) conducts a research to investigate notions of college students about NESTs and NNESTs. When teachers are instructors of classes, NNESTs gave more advantages because they themselves have the experience of being English language learners [26]. This result is congruent with the research made by Phillipson and Medgyes (Medgyes, 1992; Phillipson, 1996) [27] [28]. NNESTs are more emphatic to learners' difficulty and needs in their English study so that they can teach English language strategies more effectively as it is said good teacher know where to scratch when it is itchy. In this sense, NNESTs could satisfy learners' teaching needs more successfully. Considering class managing, learners usually think that NNETs are stricter than NESTs so as to control class better. However, this is more or less related to different teaching styles because of their different cultural background. Chinese learners of all levels are often well-disciplined, even those from primary schools. NESTs demonstrate interesting and harmonious class environment in classrooms and make the language learners feel involved in the foreign culture. And in such kind of relaxed classrooms, it would be easier for shy and inverted learners to communicate with the target language, English. That's also the reason why language learners usually regard NESTs as humorous, relaxed and cheerful, whereas NNESTs are strict, respectable and tolerant. Consequently, NESTs are better at communicative skills teaching, and NESTs are better at grammar teaching.

IV. DISCUSSION

English language teaching is not absolutely decided by one sole factor, teachers' language proficiency, but it is an important factor which can intensely facilitate teaching and learning. Admittedly, there are more qualities to successful English language teaching to be considered besides professional perspectives of language pedagogy, such as hard-working, patience, trust, helpfulness, devotion, friendliness, sincerity and so on.

I, as an NNEST, once had the opportunity to work with a NEST to teach English at a college of China years ago. Our teaching was actually based on complementary advantages to promote our English language teaching. From my perspective, the strengths NESTs in TEFL are as follows. Firstly, their knowledge about their mother tongue and western cultures are better. They spend more time than NNESTs in giving learners knowledge about the western culture and language background. The standard and model of English language is the most desirable thing from NESTs in English teaching classrooms in China. In this sense, people usually have higher expectations for them, which also make NESTs feel overwhelmed. Secondly, NNESTs can create a passionate communicative environment and atmosphere for English language learners in China. They pay more attention to learners' using English to carry meanings instead of exact correctness and accuracy of phrases or sentences. Thirdly, English language learners in China usually have positive comments about NESTs on their native language authority, personal personality and their knowledge related English culture. However, negative comments focus on teaching

experience deficiency, lack of knowledge about local education system, local culture and local language-Chinese, and sometimes irresponsibility.

NNESTs usually have the same experience as the English learners, their students, are having. Therefore they could understand what the learners are going through immediately and provide suggestions and help accordingly. When they are teaching English, they could subconsciously alternate between the native language and the target language in order to maximize learners' benefits. They are quite familiar with Chinese learning styles and local conventions [29]. NNESTs often lack linguistic background and confidence in English teaching. Years ago Medgyes (1992) concluded that the differences between NESTs and NNESTs maybe result from their differences in linguistic confidence in the classrooms. Therefore they teach English differently. Given this, all the differences in their teaching methods and practice can be attributed to their disparate English language background [30]. However, I think that teaching effectiveness of a teacher should not depend on whether one is a native speaker or not. As an NNEST myself, I have a lot of chances to communicate with English language learners and some NESTs in China. A majority of NESTs in China teach oral English course in schools of different levels. Language learners believe that NESTs have decent language of English, which motivate them to communicate with the native speakers more, especially in oral classes. Meanwhile learners prefer and are more reliable on their native pronunciations and English language knowledge. However, they choose NNESTs, Chinese English teachers, because they always take their own English level into consideration in reality, English exams. NESTs are usually believed to be better in creating relaxed classroom environments, encouraging students trying the target language, and coping with the oral mistakes. It is much likely due to their different language environment in which they were brought up and also the concepts of English language teaching that formed in different countries.

As far as I am concerned, the advantages of learning from NNESTs are as follows. Firstly, the mother tongue of Chinese could be an advantage in terms of facilitating teaching and learning process in many ways. Everything is a double-edged sword. A complete English language environment could force learners to increase their English speaking frequency, and meanwhile it could be an obstacle when learners' language competence is deficient to understand what a teacher says. Thus mother tongue of Chinese is an effective tool in communication in EFL classroom. Secondly, NNESTs are successful models of EFL for English language learners. Though NESTs are perfect English language users, they did not learn English in the same way as NNESTs and learners. In this sense, it is also believed that NNESTs are good at teaching English learning strategies. They achieved all those strategies not only from their own learning experience, but also from their professional training in theory. They can combine theory with practice in actual teaching so as to benefit learners more. Thirdly, NNESTs can anticipate English language

difficulties that learners meet in their learning process. This is also related to the similar learning experience. Thus NNESTs can be exactly sensitive to language difficulties, and help learners overcome them easily.

V. CONCLUSION

There are a lot of meaningful differences between NESTs and NNESTs from many perspectives as above. NNESTs have been a long-time existence in the neglected area of teacher studies. As an innately different entity from NESTs, their "specific needs, constraints and benefits went largely unnoticed, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of teachers worldwide were non-natives"(Arva & Medgyes, 2000, p.355) [30]. NNESTs, "comprising 80% of the world's English teacher labor force, have a unique role in the global triumph of English, but they are frequently perceived and treated at a lower professional status as compared with NESTs, which leads to unprofessional favoritism in many settings and unfair employment discrimination" [31]. And now the number of NESTs is steadily growing in China with rapid development of China and spread of English language as one of the international languages. NESTs have better language competence, and they have different English language teaching style in classrooms. And their different language teaching styles results from their different levels of language proficiency. But the point is both of them are able to be good English language teachers in their own terms.

It is better to combine both NESTs and NNESTs in English language teaching where there are varieties of English. And team teaching is preferable because both of them have the features that cannot be replaced respectively. According to my own experience and observation, Chinese students demonstrated better language performance in English Class and benefit more when both NNESTs and NESTs have taught their English. And when NESTs and NNESTs teach together, they could leverage their unique capacities respectively in Chinese education system. The two different types of teachers could complement each other, but they could not be replaced by each other completely. As the representatives of target English culture, NESTs should find ways to invite English-learners to be involved more in the practices of English culture. And meanwhile English language classrooms are an ideal place for them to explore the knowledge of local Chinese culture, where native and non-native teachers could learn from each other so as to maximize the benefits of teaching¹.

It is suggested that more qualified NESTs should be employed in order to build a constructive language environment for Chinese English learners. The government of China begins to set some general standards as recruitment qualifications of foreign teachers, such as relative diploma, teaching experience, Chinese culture knowledge, and even Mandarin competence etc. over the past few years, the

concerned governmental organizations are working on tightening up regulations about the recruitment of foreign teachers. Being native speakers should not be the only requirement to be an English language teacher in China.

Both the government and the schools should provide more opportunities for Chinese English teachers to further their education or be trained in English-speaking countries so that they could have better English language competence and supply highly qualified language teaching to Chinese students. Ultimately the true value of English teachers in TEFL does not totally depend on the ability to speak English language, but also on their experience and knowledge about English language education and skills of combining the language proficiency and knowledge to teach their students.

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¹ NESTs: native English speaking teachers; NNESTs: non-native English speaking teachers; EFL: English as a foreign language; TEFL: teaching English as a foreign language

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