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Profiling the "native speaker" of English: Myths and implications for ESL learning and teaching

ABSTRACT This article discusses the controversial concept of the "native speaker" of English within the context of the language policy on higher education of not only Southern Africa in general, but also of many other bi- or multilingual countries that are faced with the problem of choosing a language that can be used for higher education. First, the article analyzes in some detail the different criteria used for defining a native speaker of English. It shows that many of the common assumptions are either hollow, half-truths or are deliberately intended to reinforce social, political, economic and educational exclusivity. The article then goes on to show how the notion of the "native speaker" of English affects ESL teaching and learning. In each case, it is argued that an insistence on "native speaker" norms, such as the use of "standard" English, suffocates the growth of regional varieties that have characterized, over many generations, the accommodative nature of English. The remaining part of the article is devoted to suggesting the ways and means of tackling English language learning problems in order to enhance the students' academic literacy skills. The article concludes by proposing that the main challenge in our current language discourse is to design a vibrant learning and teaching curriculum that can produce an academic intelligentsia that are capable of competing globally.

Keywords: native speaker; acquisition; Standard English; dialect, mother tongue; critical period; first language, second language; bilingual; multilingual; competence

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to stimulate debate on the concept of the "native speaker" of English in our multicultural learning environments, and to clear some myths about the "nativity" of using English. More specifically, the objective is to show how the controversy of the "native speaker" of English affects "equity" in higher education and how native speaker norms spill on to ESL teaching, especially how proficiency in English entrenches the power of the "native" speakers as opposed to "non-native" speakers.

For many people, who live in multicultural societies in Africa and other parts of the world that have gone through the trauma of colonialism, the mention of "native speaker" evokes violent and polarized emotions. For those still living in the comfort zone of colonial nostalgia, they may regard a "native speaker" as an anthropologically "primitive" person whose culture and language are unsophisticated, to the extent that the native language is regarded a hindrance to the intellectual development of the learner. And for those who are pressured by the centrifugal force of a global language, they may view a "native speaker" of English as a person who comes from the epicenter of a dominant language that suffocates other languages through social, cultural, economic, political, intellectual and linguistic hegemony.

The use of the term "native speaker" in ESL/EFL learning and teaching also elicits a subtle meaning that cuts across fundamental issues in English language teaching, such as the respective roles of the so-called "native" and "non-native" teachers of English. Within the language teaching profession, it seems, being classified a "native speaker" carries a higher status, and in some cases opens up job opportunities. This, then, begs the question: who in fact is a "native" or "non-native" speaker of English, and what are the elements that may qualify one to be called a "native" or "non-native" speaker? And for those of us who live in the "outer circle" where English is used as an international language, how does this controversy affect our international communication, learning and teaching?

2. Native or non-native speaker of English

Perhaps the very first question that needs to be answered is: who is a "native" or "non-native" speaker of English? For most people there is probably no difficulty in determining what their mother tongue is, and so few people ever bother to question the criterion they use when they say a particular language is their mother tongue. For many of us, therefore, to begin to think about what yardstick we use in order to call ourselves mother tongue speakers is not only theoretical and pedantic, but also hair-splitting. The term "native speaker" seems to carry the same assumption as the word "mother tongue"; but like St. Augustine's time, "we do not understand it until we start to think about it carefully" (Ellis, 1993: 78).

3. Popular definition of a native speaker

According to Scutnabb-Kangas (1981: 13-14), a "native speaker" is one who thinks, dreams and counts in a language one has acquired as a child. The assumption here is that one learns these three functions in the early stages of one's primary language, and in Rabel-Heymann's (1978: 222) view "continues to perform in that language, even though later on other languages may become as important as, or even more important than, the primary language".

This criterion, although thought-provoking, is inadequate in trying to define, unambiguously, a "native speaker" of English. For instance, people who have lived for a time in a new language community can use the language of their adopted community for these functions, even though they may not speak very well the new language. Krashen's (1985) highly regarded "affective filter hypothesis" tells us that personality factors, rather than one's knowledge of the second language, play a crucial role in deciding how quickly one can go over to dreaming and thinking in the foreign language. The point to note here is that one's ability to think, dream and count in a language is a poor criterion for defining a native speaker, because these functions can also be performed in a language that has been acquired much later in one's adult life.

4. Mother tongue criterion

In bi- or multilingual communities such as South Africa that are trying to grapple with issues of equity and accessibility in education, the question of "mother tongue" occupies a center stage for discussion (Williams, 1996: 104). In these contexts, "mother tongue" ("motherese" as Howe 1993: 14 prefers to call it) or the language of the "hearth and home" is used as a convenient reference for determining what a native speaker of a particular language or dialect is. Here, it is taken to mean the language a speaker tacitly heard since early childhood or the language one normally uses at home. It also refers to the language the "mother" speaks that is passed on to her children.

Although this is a popular criterion, it masks inherent myths. The question is: who is "mother" in language acquisition? Certainly the term does not necessarily refer to a biological mother, but may be used more approximately to refer to the person who establishes a regular and lasting linguistic bond of communication with the child. The influence of the mother on the child's language acquisition is doubtful in many intercultural marriages where the mother or father comes from a different language community. The children of such intercultural marriages usually speak the dominant local language, which may not necessarily be the language of the parents.

In Southern Africa, particularly in South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe, baby-sitters virtually take over the role of working mothers in terms of the acculturation of children, and it is presumptuous to think that children brought up in this manner will obviously speak their "mother tongue". In metropolitan Johannesburg where there is a conglomeration of different tribes through geographical mobility, it is very common that children of English, Afrikaner, Zulu, Sotho, Venda, or Tswana parents end up speaking as their "mother tongue" one of the local sociolects, depending on which of the codes is dominant in the area. In this case, one's "native" language is by no means apparent, since code switching applies both at home and outside.

The mother tongue criterion also raises doubts about the status of "standard" English or the Received Pronunciation (RP). If "standard" English, a variety that Wilson (2003: 1) says started out as an artificial upper class variety in Britain, is rarely spoken at home, can the vast majority of speakers of other varieties of English in the United Kingdom such as Cockney, Yorkshire, Scottish or Irish be called native speakers of English? In this case, the speaking of "standard" English is probably not a good yardstick to measure who is and who is not a native speaker of English because it means that the vast majority of the people in the United Kingdom who do not speak "standard" English do not qualify to be called "native" speakers. Even if we were to regard speakers of other English varieties in the United Kingdom as native speakers, this would still leave us with the question of whether all the varieties are equal in status. The problem with the "hearth and home" criterion is that it ignores the potential for code switching, underestimates the 'globalization' of English as a lingua franca and the effect of cultural diffusion as a result of the mass media.

5. Defining a native speaker by English competence

One way of avoiding the "native speaker" trap is to speak of "native speaker competence", which is the ability to produce fluent discourse. Widdowson (1983) refers to 'competence' as the 'capacity' to handle different communicative situations while Gee (1998: 56-57) calls it the

'ability', 'mastery' and 'control' of language. Bachman prefers to use the term 'communicative language ability' to refer to the concept, which includes the knowledge of the language and the ability to apply that knowledge: "Communicative language ability consists of both knowledge of competence and the capacity for implementing or executing that competence in appropriate contextualized communicative language use" (Bachman, 1990).

As regards 'performance', which is a corollary aspect of 'competence', Blanton (1994: 230) views it as the extent to which one has control over language, such as the capacity, authority and power to use it. In defining a "native speaker" by performance, one is therefore talking about what the speaker 'does' in a particular language situation: the authority and power one imposes over the communicative acts. It is concerned with outcomes, "the ability to use language in the performance of specific language tasks…in which language is used purposefully" (Bachman & Palmer, 1996: 75).

The competence criterion implies that natives of a particular community have native speaker competence, while on the other hand non-natives of the community may also acquire native or near-native competence. In a multilingual society, the competence criterion is conveniently used by decision makers, parents and teachers to place a child in a particular language group for learning in one's "mother" tongue. The definition of a "native speaker" by competence appears to be culturally and politically acceptable, and seems to accommodate those who speak new varieties of English throughout the world.

However, the definition of a "native speaker" of English gauged by the level of competence has three fundamental weaknesses. The first is that, strictly speaking, it means one's ability to conform to the set of linguistic and socio-linguistic conventions of a particular speech community. And the notion of a speech community implies that members comply with the linguistic behavior by which the community is defined. It is common knowledge that "competent" English speakers from the "outer circle" are not always capable of conforming to the socio-linguistic conventions of people in the "inner circle" countries, such as Britain and the United States of America.

The second problem about defining a "native speaker" by competence is that in multicultural communities such as South Africa, speakers will always have at least two competing languages. This means that whatever competence they may acquire in one language will not necessarily reflect an equal amount of competence in the other. They may have what Bachman (1990) [see Figure 1] calls organizational competence, which involves grammatical and textual competence, but may lack pragmatic competence, that is to say, illocutionary and socio-linguistic competence, such as sensitivity to register, idiom, cultural referents and dialect variety. The lack of pragmatic competence apparently affects many highly proficient speakers of new English varieties who have learned English in different social settings in which their local culture influences the manner in which they express themselves.

The third problem of classifying "native speakers" of English by their level of competence is that communicative competence is not a matter of either you have it all or you don't: there are scales of competence, ranging from general language proficiency to academic language proficiency. For instance, a "native" working class speaker of English may not use grammatically "correct" sentences in social contexts, which is perfectly admissible, while an immigrant educated at Eton, Harrow, Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard or Yale may use an impeccable standard variety in

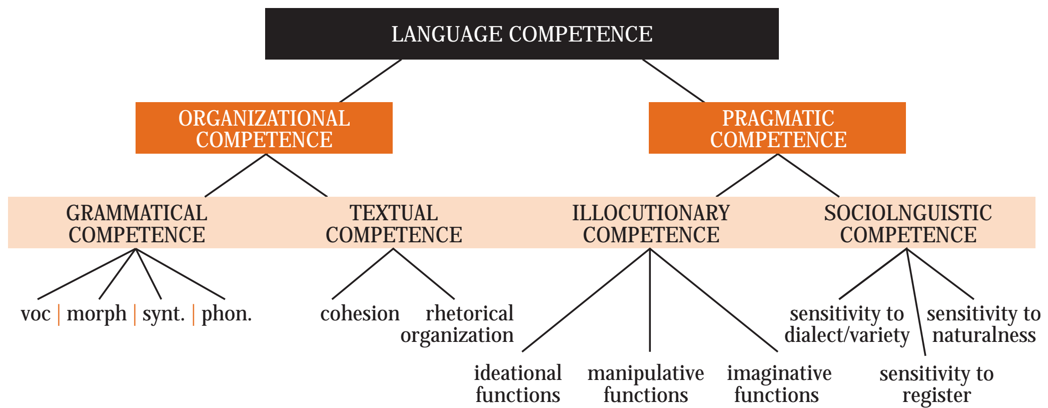

Figure 1: Bachman's (1990) model of language competence

academic settings that would qualify him/her to be called a "more competent" speaker. In this case 'competence', to use Aristotelian terms, is an accidental rather than an essential property of a native speaker. Even to use a more socio-linguistically oriented definition of competence based on function, which describes the frequency with which one uses a language, does not easily fit the bill either. This is because people are often obliged, for example at work, to use English, which they may not particularly know very well. This is usually the case with non-English speaking immigrant minorities and the type of communication that takes place in countries for which English is considered the 'official' language, but where the majority of the people speak other languages.

6. The critical period hypothesis

If for a moment we move away from the contentious aspect of a "native speaker" of English based on competence and focus on generative theories of child language acquisition – with their typical rationalistic approach - we can make use of the "critical period" hypothesis, first proposed by Lenneberg (1967), to determine who a "native speaker" of English is. According to this theory, the syntax of a language is acquired quickly and effortlessly by children between the ages of two to puberty, when their brain shows plasticity that facilitates rapid language learning. A reasonable "rule of thumb" definition of a "native speaker" of English might therefore refer to someone who acquired English during this "critical period" and has a subconscious and intuitive knowledge of rules and meanings. Any language learned subsequently might be considered a "second" or "non-native" language and this is irrespective of the ethnic or speech community a person might be a member of.

This nativist approach (the term nativist is derived from the fundamental assumption that language acquisition is innately determined) leaves us, however, with some imponderables. The first is the validity of the "critical period" hypothesis itself. The theory attempts to make a distinction between language acquisition and learning. The dichotomy is, in my view, dyed in the wool of behaviorism, a theory that is fundamentally flawed when applied to language learning, but one which is reincarnated by Krashen (1982: 83). The theory stands on shifting sands because research by

McLaughlin (1978) and Gregg (1984) suggests "learnt" language by adults can also be made automatic through practice to become "acquired". Despite this evidence, the "critical period" hypothesis is still in vogue and attracts many disciples (Blickerton 1990: 115-122).

The second problem is that the "critical hypothesis" theory deals with language acquisition in general, rather than the acquisition of a particular language or language varieties. It ignores the fact that some languages are cognate, such as Bantu languages (e.g. Zulu and Xhosa), Germanic languages, (e.g. German, Dutch and Danish), Romance languages, (e.g. Italian, French, Spanish and Portuguese). Because of their similar linguistic genealogy, it may be easier to acquire a native or near native competence in the "second" language. The third problem of using the "critical period" hypothesis is that it skirts the question of what it is that is acquired; once we put aside the rarefied area of syntax or vocabulary of a language. Over and above these problematic issues, the theory does not consider the important factor of personal motivation in language learning.

7. Defining a native speaker by attitude

There is another school of thought that suggests a "native speaker" of English can be defined by the cultural values with which one is identified, regardless of the accent, competence or fluency in the language. This socio-psychological definition is determined by the level of assimilation of the second or foreign culture that one has gone through (assimilado in Portuguese and evolue in French). The enculturation process becomes an internal mechanism that is symbolic, and may lead members of the assimilated groups to minimize or even deny knowledge of their mother tongue and to be ashamed of their origins (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981: 15-16).

The recognition of someone as a "native speaker" of English may also be done by other speakers of English (external identification), which may coincide with one's own view of oneself. This situation has been reported among the assimilated minorities of the Maori in New Zealand, the Aborigines of Australia and the Red Indians of the United States. The process of self-denial may even be aggravated in societies where ideological and economic factors influence the identification process, such as belonging to the group that has the economic and political power. The change of names by some oppressed people during the apartheid regime, such as from Ndhlovu to Olifant, Ncube to Johnson or Isreal to Disreali during the Victorian era is part of the grand desire to be assimilated into the ruling class.

However, the problems of identifying a "native speaker" of English according to attitudes are quite obvious. Firstly, one may wish to be identified as a "native speaker", but may not be accepted as such, or on the other hand one may be identified as a "native speaker" but may not wish to. Skutnabb-Kangas (1981) suggests that the difference between bilingual competence and bilingual identification may be greater than is often perceived, and quite often camouflages our avowed notions of who a "native speaker" of English is.

Secondly, the definition of a "native speaker" by the language with which one is identified has a pathological effect: it hides one's ethnic identity, and may even undermine the statehood of a person. Time honored Piaget (1971) and Vygotsky (1973) have probed into the psychological effects of language acquisition, and have come to the conclusion that a language serves various other purposes other than making social bonds, such as providing a dialectical connectionism

between internal and external reality. This psychological function is often not fulfilled by using the classification of a native speaker via the notion of the language with which one is identified.

8. Native speaker and bilingualism

The controversy of the "native speaker" of English extends to bi- or multilingualism, particularly the collateral language situation that obtains in many societies throughout the world. The fundamental question is: if many societies use English and other indigenous languages, at what point does one become a native or non-native speaker of English? Here, the problem lies with the use of shibboleths like "first" and "second" language, which are misleading to the extent that they imply a bilingual speaker has a first and second language, that they are acquired and used in that order of ease and frequency.

But this may not necessarily be the case: it is quite possible to use the language acquired later, such as English, with greater frequency and fluency than the "first" language, and speakers may even forget much of their so-called "first" language, if they stop speaking it after early childhood. For instance, an Afrikaner child who grows up in a predominantly English speaking community may end up using English as a "first" language or an English child who grows up in a predominantly Zulu community may end up using Zulu as a "first" language. The story of Joseph Conrad, a Polish by birth who grew up in England and became one of the best 'English' novelists, is a good example of how the myth of a native speaker of English is often hard to maintain.

If I may return to the example given above of children who grow up in bilingual communities, what language(s) are these children native speakers or non-native speakers of, and what is their "first" or "second" language? In Southern Africa where English is preferred for inter-cultural communication, especially among the educated elite, is there no possibility that those who use it at home, at the work place, for economic, educational, legal, literary, political and technological discourse can be "native speakers"? Cele (2004: 43) claims that in South Africa, besides the 9% who already use English as a "first" (note: not as a "native") language, 40% use it in varying degrees of competence. If we go by Cele's figures, the myth of an exclusive "native speaker" of English is exposed because there is a possibility that some of the forty percent who use English "in varying degrees" may in fact use it more competently than some of the nine percent who are considered to be "first" language speakers. If the 40% who use English in varying degrees are "natives" of South Africa, is it useful to speak of them as "non-native speakers" of English in their "native" country? On this issue, I am persuaded to take Kachru's position (1992) who says of Indian English literature, "the medium is non-native, but the message is not".

9. Language of the native speaker

The discussion of the concept of a "native speaker" of English would not be complete if I did not talk about what it is that "native speakers" of English speak. This is important because if we say someone is a "native speaker" of English, are we referring to British, American, Australian, Jamaican, Liberian, South African, Zimbabwean, Kenyan, Singaporean or Fijian English? Are these regional varieties dialects or accents? We need to talk about these issues because they are an integral part of the definition of a "native speaker" of English, especially as they remind us that the name we give to something shows how we see it and classify it.

The crucial question we need to answer is: do "native speakers" of English speak a language or dialect? Saussure's (1916: 16) famous distinction of 'langue' and 'parole' is instructive. For him

parole is the totality of individual speech acts by the speakers of a language, and langue is "a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adapted by a social body to permit individuals to exercise that faculty", which involves an abstraction from parole (Ellis, 1993: 104). In my view, Saussure's (1916) definition is vague, not because of its French connection, but because it is couched in technical terms that obfuscate the fundamental issues. Hymes (1972: 18) is much clearer when he suggests: "a language is a variable system of codes, specialized in function; not all of the codes will be intelligible to all members of a community".

The crux of Hymes' definition of a language is that it is a "variable system" that may not be homogeneous or mutually intelligible among those who speak it. This sounds a good definition because it accommodates our different ways of speaking English. But there is a problem with this view of a language. If, for example, one fails to understand Cockney, Irish, Jamaican, Black American, Scottish or Liberian English, can we still say we speak the same language, and does this imply speakers of these varieties are non-native speakers? In this case, the lack of mutual intelligibility is neither a good indicator of a language nor a precise definition of a language, because a language goes far beyond phonological variations that may mar verbal communication with other speakers of the same language.

The crucial point that Hymes (1972) raises is that being a "native speaker" of English does not necessarily guarantee universal intelligibility among other global users. In fact, more often than not, a so-called English "native speaker" from the "inner circle" countries such as the USA, UK, Australia and New Zealand may not be understood easily by speakers in the "outer circle" who speak the same language. This factor needs to be carefully considered in many of our multi-cultural learning settings, especially the choice of our teaching staff, learning materials, the cultural relevance of texts, and examination materials.

In trying to understand what it is that a "native speaker" of English speaks, Hudson's (1985: 31) suggests that "native speakers" of English speak a dialect, which can be distinguished from the 'parent' language by its distinctive accent. He claims that dialects are usually spoken by fewer people and do not carry the same prestige as the parent language. This claim is hard to prove because a language can be spoken by a few bands of people, and 'prestige' depends on who is making the judgment and the purpose for which the judgment is being made. Perhaps those who share Hudson's (1985) claim that a language is defined by size and prestige need to be reminded of Sapir's (1921: 22) wise observation:

> There is no more striking general fact about language than its universality. One may argue as to whether a particular tribe engages in activities that are worthy of the name of religion or of art, but we know of no people that are not possessed of a fully developed language. The lowliest South African Bushman speaks in the forms of a rich symbolic system that is in essence perfectly comparable to the speech of the cultivated Frenchman.

The problem of trying to define a language is that not only is it notoriously emotional, it is also embedded in nationalism, which profoundly influences our thinking about what is and what is not a language (Williams, 1996). If for a moment we accept the view that a dialect is a "regional variety" of a language (Hudson, 1985: 31), such as American, Jamaican, Australian or South

African English, then we can more or less say that a "native speaker" of English is one whose primary language is a dialect of English because we know that any language has one or more dialects, which are spoken and written entities, comprising systems of grammar, phonology and lexis.

While the classification of a "native speaker" via the dialect criterion has merit, we need to be cautious about what we mean because some dialects that are mutually intelligible in every respect may want to call themselves languages, such as Punjabi and Urdu, Swedish and Norwegian, Sesotho and Setswana. Of late, Serbian and Croatian are typical examples of "dialects" of the same "language" emerging as separate "languages", with archaisms and provincialisms being adopted to "purify" the language (Gee, 1997; Woodward, 1996).

The confusion between language and dialect is exacerbated by the French use of the word dialecte to refer to regional varieties only that are written and have a literature, in contrast with regional varieties that are not written, which the French prefer to call patois, a term that has a derogatory connotation. The point here is that in trying to describe what it is that a "native speaker" of English speaks, one cannot make an absolute distinction between the 'language' and 'dialect' they speak, because the two are mutual in many ways. What we can safely say, though, is that regional English dialects are marked by distinctive accents that enable us to more or less tell where one comes from, but even then "accents" get blurred by education, social and regional mobility.

This takes us back to square one where we can say, with some reservation, that "native speakers" of English are those people who speak it as a dialect, have an accent, have grown up in a native English speaking country and have English speaking parents. But, again, there are problems with this characterization of a "native speaker" because some people, whose parents are native speakers of a different language to the country in which they have grown up, are not completely fluent in their parents' original language. Also, some countries are officially English speaking such as Singapore and Jamaica, but they do not speak the same way as native speakers in Australia and USA do.

10. Standard English

A more rational way of distinguishing a "native speaker" is by the manner in which one uses the "standard" version of English, which is regarded in some quarters as the model we should aspire to, and any variation to it is considered somehow inferior. Although "standard" English is difficult to pin-point, in this article I use Crystal's (1995: 110) definition cited by Parkinson (2003: 250) as "a prestige variety of a country, identified by its vocabulary and grammar and not by pronunciation. It is usually a minority variety, but the one that is most widely understood". The popularization of "standard" English or what is variously known as the "Received Pronunciation" (RP), "the Queen's English", "BBC English", "Oxford English" or "Estuary" (from the Thames Estuary) has come about through public education, urbanization, the mass media, use of the "court language", commercial, legal and literary language.

But speaking "standard" English has been known to have its own shortcomings. As early as 1962, Gimson observed that the status of the so-called "standard" English in England, which is spoken by a few privileged classes, such as the educated and upper classes is often exaggerated.

Honey (1981) points out that although "standard" English commands overwhelming respect as a notional model, it lacks credibility as a 'representative' variety of accent since it is spoken by a numerically insignificant minority. He notes that the privileged few people who speak it are often seen as either "talking posh", snobbish or outright caricatures of the English gentlemen. If this perception of those who speak "standard" English has any credence at all, its future role as a variety of a native language is precarious, because it carries the stigma of being a variety used only by an elitist group.

However, Honey's (1981) criticism of "standard" English as lacking credibility and representativeness is, in my view, cynical and apologetic because it fails to acknowledge the most attractive qualities of English, such as its adaptability, its ability to absorb seemingly limitless influences and its ability to develop myriad versions. Its absorptive capacity enhances its richness while maintaining the color of indigenous languages in a manner that few languages in the world today are capable of. In our schools, colleges and universities in Southern Africa and elsewhere, we need therefore to exploit the accommodative nature of English by accepting local and regional variations that add flavor to it, while maintaining common rules that facilitate intelligibility. This approach is likely to "de-hegemonize" English, as we shall proceed from the premise that English is not just spoken by an exclusive club of people, but is a vibrant language that is essential for global communication.

Another point that calls for a 'multi-cultural approach' to the teaching and learning of English is that it is now more of an international than a local language. The sheer diversity of varieties of English worldwide frees us from a parochial approach, and allows us to draw on language teaching approaches that reflect the local and global needs of our learners. In this scenario, both "native" and "non-native" speakers of English need to view themselves as vital cogs in the process of ESL teaching and learning.

11. Native versus non-native English teachers

The "native speaker" debate also spills on to ESL teaching, especially the relative roles of "native" and "non-native" English teachers (Medgyes, 1994; Davies, 1996). One important question that constantly arises in ESL pedagogy is whether what is authentic for the "native speaker" teacher is also authentic for the "non-native speaker" learner. Widdowson (1996) argues that a good starting point for helping ESL/EFL students 'authenticate' the language for themselves is by exploiting the classroom culture and the culture of the society in which they live. He suggests that the judicious use of the "mother" tongue can be a cultural capital to help build on the classroom culture as well as that of the wider community.

Researchers such as Braine (2002) and Canagarajah (2002) also support the idea of maintaining contact with the "home" language teachers and peers, and of recognizing students' needs to "take their identities, values, and interests with them as they communicate in the academy" (Canagarajah, 2002: 37). In this way, the students' "heritage" language can be seen as a window through which they can be helped to 'appropriate' the foreign language for themselves, and that contexts which will be meaningful for them have somehow to be constructed in the classroom out of this primary experience of first language and culture.

This "humanistic" approach implies that there is need to avoid regarding the "mother" tongue a "necessary evil", especially in multilingual learning environments, such as universities in

South Africa and other parts of the Commonwealth in which we find students from various speech communities. In these learning institutions, bi- or multilingualism needs to be viewed positively as an additive and not as a subtractive learning factor. Tucker (1998: 18) points out that the language competence of bilinguals "should not be regarded as simply the sum of two monolingual competencies, but should rather be judged in conjunction with the users' total linguistic repertoire". Widdowson (1996) is forthright in advocating a shift in our mindset so that teachers who speak the learners' mother tongue can be given priority because they will use their knowledge of the students' first language as a springboard for teaching the second language.

This approach is further supported by Cook (1999) and Kramsch (1993, 1998); the latter particularly considers the 'mother tongue' within the context of a methodology designed to make the most of the interface between the different cultures in the classroom. For Kramsch (1998), the "mother tongue" is part of a wider activation of the diversity of cultures that any classroom contains. She argues that in using the "mother tongue" to teach English, the learner journeys back and forth within the two cultures in search of a "third place". In other words, the interaction between one culture and another, in methodological terms, "preserves the diversity of styles, purposes, and interest among learners and the variety of local educational cultures" (Kramsch, 1993: 247). To support her case, she quotes an example of poetry in which she uses multiple translations to "offer interesting windows of interpretations in language classes" (Kramsch, 1993: 163).

While there are these persuasive voices that advocate the use of the learners' language and culture as a lubricant to keep the wheels of an English lesson moving smoothly, and to tap the rich vein of cultural diversity in the language classroom as a starting point and not as an end in itself, the use of the "mother tongue" to teach English may be considered an attempt to bring back through the back door the fall from grace of the Grammar-Translation Method that had emphasized translation and the teaching of grammar as a way of "disciplining the mind". I agree that there is pedagogic sense in teaching English within the culture of the learners, but teaching English using the "mother tongue" takes us back to the era of the Contrastive Hypothesis authored by Lado (1957) and given flesh by Chomsky (1959) and Selinker (1972). The hard-to-prove contrastive hypothesis claimed that the acquisition of a second language is largely determined by the structure of an earlier acquired language, and that those structures of the second language that coincide with corresponding structures of the first language are assimilated with great ease as a result of "positive transfer". The point here is that if we are going to ignore the strides we have made in second or foreign language teaching methodology, we shall have capitulated to our largely discredited earlier theories, and the consequence of such a retreat is that we shall have lost the direction we are taking in applied linguistics.

More worrying are Kramsch's (1993) and Widdowson's (1996) views on using the "mother tongue" to build on the classroom culture, because they ignore Krashen's (1988) highly influential theory of the Natural Approach, which suggests that what matters most in language teaching is that "input" should be comprehensible. If the input is comprehensible, the students will understand the message regardless of the fact that the teacher is a native or non-native speaker of English. Besides, the argument that teachers who speak the "native" language of the learners should be given preference seems to have a hidden agenda and smacks of the monolingual orthodoxy that gave birth to the ascendancy of the "native speaker" in ELT, sharply criticized

by Pennycook (1994) and Phillipson (1992) as not only promoting "linguistic imperialism" but also exclusivity.

12. Implications for higher learning

Having shown that attempting to define a "native" or "non-native" speaker of English is problematic and that the controversy of a "native speaker" of English also encroaches upon ESL teaching, how then shall we proceed to tackle the problems of language learning in our institutions of higher learning? It seems to me that in order to make progress we need to acknowledge the basic heuristic imperatives:

- The first is that the status of English as the language for higher learning, teaching and research is increasing internationally, and many reputable universities in Europe, Africa, Asia and South America are now using English for academic purposes. Many of these institutions have designed specialized courses of one kind or the other for improving the students' proficiency in English. This trend is being dictated by the globalization of the world economy, which is mostly articulated in English. However, this should not be misconstrued to mean that the learners' heritage language should be relegated to the backstage in favor of English. The heritage language should be the cultural gold mine from which English can be purified into a fine ingot. Canagarajah (2002: 36) reminds us: "students stimulate the activity of the disciplinary communities in constructing the discourses that they agree to uphold in an effort to encode their world view and maintain their identity".

  What this means is that in order to stimulate intellectual activity in the chosen discipline of the students, we need to contextualize ESL learning and teaching by selecting teaching materials that stimulate the students' imagination and interactive abilities while preserving their culture and identity. Blanton (1994: 221) resonates eloquently this point:

  > Whatever else we do with L2 students to prepare them for the academic mainstream, we must foster the behaviors of 'talking' to texts, talking and writing about them, linking them to other text , connecting them to their readers' own lives and experience, and then using their experience to illuminate the text and the text to illuminate their experience.

- The second imperative is that attempting to teach "standard" English or the so- called BBC English in our different institutions of learning is both unrealistic and impracticable because not only is it remote and inaccessible to many ESL/EFL learners and teachers as well, but also poses the danger of suffocating the growth of regional varieties that are essential for the nourishment of English.
- The third is that we need to promote and strengthen our regional English varieties by 'de-colonizing', 're-colonizing', 'nationalizing' and 're-standardizing' the regional varieties because the purpose of any language is to act as a tool of thought, which helps to domesticate nature and the elements in the environment. Already English has shown its propensity for absorbing and assimilating foreign words from other languages such as Latin, French and German. In Southern Africa, we have already donated to the English language words such as 'donga', 'vlei', 'berg', 'kopje', 'biltong', 'fundi', 'sangoma', 'amadlozi', 'muti', 'indaba', 'amadoda' 'shebeen' and many others. These words and other structural variations should be accepted as part of a regional variety that adds color and growth to the English language.
- The fourth is that our teaching of content subjects should put at the center stage the

development of "strategic competence" in English, which is defined by Bachman and Palmer (1996) as the ability to organize knowledge, to control grammar, to write cohesively and coherently, to use language strategically and to be sensitive to naturalness, such as the use of idiom, dialect and register. In order to enhance the language competence of students in our institutions of higher learning, many of whom come from impoverished learning backgrounds, we should design teaching strategies that enable collaboration between content and language teachers so that both sets of teachers can develop collectively the language skills that foster the academic discourse abilities of the students.

I am aware that many universities and technical colleges in Southern Africa and elsewhere already have English for Academic Development (EAD) or English for Academic Purpose (EAP) at first year level that are intended to scaffold the academic literacy skills of students. It is also possible to design courses for penultimate or final year students, such as dissertation/research paper writing, academic writing skills, job related communication skills and so forth. From the way our colleges and universities operate, especially the complex nature of our time-tables, I acknowledge that the logistics of collaborative work are daunting, but a concerted approach is more likely to reap better results than otherwise.

- The fifth, and perhaps the most important, is that we need to focus on developing students' academic literacy skills in our institutions of higher learning, which entail fostering autonomous learning and developing learning skills that enable them to become competent learners in the different areas of their specialization. To achieve this, we need to design English for Academic Development (EAD) courses that respond to the known needs of our students, such as teaching them how to orchestrate cognitive, meta-cognitive and affective strategies. These are the skills that enable students to select and synthesize the gist of a text, skills that help them to discriminate between important and unimportant information. I fully agree with Van Dyk and Weideman (2004: 9), who suggest that the academic literacy skills we need to foster are interpretation, making inferences, hierarchical ordering, classifying, contextualizing, paraphrasing, summarizing, comparing and contrasting, making logical arguments, rebuttal, and so forth. To ensure that these skills are taught, high stakes end of semester examinations should focus on these skills.

Apart from cognitive strategies, we need to encourage our students to use meta-cognitive strategies, such as planning (including advance preparation, problem identification and goal getting), self-monitoring and performance evaluation. Developing skills in self-evaluation is particularly important because students need to check, verify and correct their own work. My experience of teaching at the University of Botswana (and perhaps you have also shared the same experience over the years) is that both novice and adept learners lack meta-cognitive skills that enable them to monitor their own work.

We also need to incorporate in our teaching curriculum affective and critical thinking skills that enable students to interrogate a text, to agree or disagree with it, to infer and extrapolate hidden meanings, to interpret information in the light of their own experiences, and to be able to distinguish between fact and opinion, evidence and conjecture. A distinct advantage of designing a curriculum for English for Academic Development that emphasizes the use of cognitive, meta-cognitive and affective skills is that students are likely to be more critical, interactive and reflective in their learning. The consequence of such a pedagogic approach is

that the learners are likely to become strategic users of English, which will help them become independent learners and be able to navigate their learning more efficiently.

13. Conclusion

Having shown that the concept of the "native speaker" of English is both controversial and elusive, and that terms such as "native", "language", "Standard English", "dialect", "mother tongue", "first", "second" and other related shibboleths are vague and fuzzy around the edges, the crucial question that arises is whether, as language educators, we should abandon the use of these terms in favor of more precise ones. My answer is "no" because it is not only unnecessary but also impracticable to abandon these terms, especially as the central concepts embedded in them are pertinent to our linguistic discourse. What we should guard against, though, is to use these terms for hegemonic purposes, or to package them as tools for social, economic, political or educational exclusion, to which they are easily prone.

Phillipson (1992: 5) aptly sums up the power of English, which has been used during the colonial era for "cultural humiliation"; but at the same time, like all other colonial languages, has been used by the oppressed to advance the struggle against oppression. The use of English in the post-colonial era should be viewed as a step towards constructing "a new agenda" for language development. This new agenda, in my view, is to liberate the English language from its negative forces and to harness it for the empowerment of the disadvantaged through a system of conscious and interactive learning and teaching that is designed to produce an academic intelligentsia that are sharp, critical and world-class.

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