

Chapter 14

ESL Students' Perceptions of Linguistically Diverse English Language Teachers in English-Speaking Countries: The Effect on Teacher Self-Image

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ABSTRACT

The majority of English language teachers worldwide are non-native English professionals who are linguistically diverse and speak different varieties of English. However, in the English language teaching profession, it is commonly believed that native English-speaking instructors are ideal teachers based solely on the fact that English is their mother tongue. This preconceived assumption, prevalent among ESL students who come to the United States to learn English, leads to the marginalization of qualified and competent non-native English language teachers, with resulting effects on their self-image. Although previous publications explore the phenomenon of student dispositions of linguistically diverse ESL instructors, they do not adequately address how teachers can deal with negative student perceptions proactively. This chapter fills that gap by contributing to the existing teacher-related scholarship through a new theory intended to empower teachers and realign students' negative beliefs and which also includes a lesson unit showcasing an implementation of that theory.

INTRODUCTION

The majority of English language teachers in the world today are non-native English speakers (NNESs). Approximately 80% percent of the world's population of English language teachers come from different linguistic backgrounds and, thus, speak different forms of English (Braine, 2010; Canagarajah, 1999,

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2005; Kato, 2015; Ma, 2012; Maum, 2002; Selvi, 2014; Song & Gonzalez Del Castillo, 2015; Wang & Fang, 2020). This large number, which continues to increase exponentially, can be attributed to the fact that today, due to globalization and the worldwide diffusion of English, more speakers of different varieties of English and learners of English for international communication exist than do native speakers of English (Crystal, 2012; Jenkins, 2009; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Selvi, 2014; Wang & Fang, 2020).

However, in the English language teaching (ELT) profession, it is commonly believed that native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) are ideal teachers of English based solely on the fact that English is their mother tongue (Amin, 1997, 1999; Barret, 2009; Song & Gonzalez Del Castillo, 2015; Wang & Fang, 2020). This supposition is especially prevalent among ESL students, that is, international students in English-speaking countries, such as the United States, Canada, and Britain, and for whom English is a second language (Floris & Renandya, 2020; Kelch & Santana-Williamson, 2002; Reis, 2011). Despite research evidence showcasing the perceived strengths of non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), such as their ability to empathize with students' language needs and problems due to their own language learning history and multilingual backgrounds, their capability to make use of students' mother tongue in teaching the target language, and their advantage in providing a good learner model for students (Blum & Johnson, 2012; Kamhi-Stein, 1999; Medgyes, 1994), the preconception of NESTs as being superior to and more suitable ESL teachers than their non-native counterparts has become mainstream in the English language teaching (ELT) field (Wang & Fang, 2020).

This chapter hypothesizes that a preference for NESELTs has a marginalizing effect on the professional identity of English language teachers of foreign descent. The effect can be very frustrating for someone who is confident, knows his or her field, and is a good teacher. Indeed, the degree to which an English language teacher creates a credible self-image is very much dictated by his or her ESL students' perspective on who is best suited to teach the target language. If teachers do not feel validated by their students, they will most likely develop a negative image of themselves and their capabilities. Admittedly, there are linguistically diverse teachers of foreign descent who have taught ESL and confronted the effect of student perception both in and out of the classroom.

The effect of student perception on teacher self-image is an important topic because "the road to the learner leads through the teacher, and teacher-related research should therefore be increased" (Medgyes, 1992, p. 340). To this end, the significance of this chapter is based on the assumption that external factors do influence NNESELTs' professional identity constructions, which in turn impact their teaching. As the number of non-native ESL teachers worldwide is on the rise, it is critical to inquire into this cause-and-effect relationship.

This chapter is useful and practical because it will serve to increase awareness about this issue and contribute to the literature on TESOL and MA/Ph.D training programs. Its expanded usefulness could include applications such as professional development and for administration to use as a potential way to value diversity in its hiring practices.

The objectives of this chapter, then, are to examine the formation of teacher self-image impacted by perceptions of ESL students and devise a proactive curricular approach to empowering and equipping linguistically diverse ESL teachers, as well as prospective teachers, with cognizance of the problem.

To that end, I will review the literature on native- and nonnative-speaker constructs, empirical studies on student perceptions of linguistically diverse English language teachers in English-speaking countries, and excerpts from published teacher narratives. I will use my findings as a basis for making recommendations for TESOL programs in the U.S. and developing a new theory aimed at equipping teachers and

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