

The Myth of the Native Speaker as a Model of English Proficiency

Richard Watson Todd
King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi

Abstract

Although academics generally take a neutral position on the pros and cons of native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) teachers of English, the general public perceives NS teachers as preferable because they provide a 'better' model of English. Even ignoring the arguments favouring NNS models in English as an International Language, many NS teachers do not provide a truly proficient model of English. Based on an analysis of a corpus of informal NS teacher writing, their English proficiency is dubious. The findings cast doubt on the usefulness of recent proposals to employ more NS teachers in Thai schools.

Perceptions of native speaker teachers in Thailand

When considering English language teachers, one basic consideration is whether they are native speakers (NSs) or non-native speakers (NNSs). Generally in society, and perhaps especially in Thailand, NS teachers are perceived as being somehow 'better'. A few quotations from articles and letters in the *Bangkok Post* illustrate this preference for NS teachers (especially, it seems, where these NSs are *farangs*).

"Native speakers are the best teachers of their own language."

"Almost all parents would rather their child be taught English by a native English speaker and are only concerned with that person's knowledge of the target language."

"It is absolutely not necessary, or even advantageous, to be taught by a bilingual teacher."

"Some people seem to believe that if you can speak a language, you can teach it."

"Thai teachers of English are weak in English writing for lack of practice."

"Filipinos teaching English rob children of a good education."

Even ignoring the overtly racist overtones of the last quote, these statements imply that there is a general feeling that NSs (or, at least, *farangs*) make better teachers of English. This perception is so widespread that many schools explicitly state in their advertising that they employ NS teachers. Advertisements for language programmes and schools often include statements like the following:

"Native language speaking tutors."

"Professional foreign teachers."

"สอนโดยอาจารย์จากประเทศไทยและอังกฤษ"

(Taught by teachers from Australia and England)

Similarly, the vast majority of advertisements seeking teachers, even for the kindergarten level, stress that the school only wishes to employ NS teachers (admittedly, the English used in the adverts sometimes suggests that a NS may be useful for checking the language before the advert is published):

"We are seeking **native English speakers.**"

"**Now! ... require** Native Speaker teaching English."

"Native English speakers, female, work with small kids."

Frequently, such job advertisements are even more specific, requiring a specific kind of NS:

"Native English speaker only (UK, USA, AUS, NZ, CAN)."

"English teacher American/British only wanted."

Advertisements like these may aim to bar certain kinds of NSs, such as the Filipinos who "rob children of a good education". Indeed, it seems likely that, for some schools, if they could get away with it, adverts would state that white-skinned, blond-haired Aryans are preferred.

It is not only the private sector which is so besotted with NS teachers. From time to time, the Ministry of Education has suggested initiatives focusing on using NS teachers. At various times, for example, the ministry has promoted bilingual programmes with NS teachers at secondary schools, has set requirements for teachers in certain situations at levels which few Thais are likely to attain, and has even made the wild proposal that all secondary schools should have a resident NS teacher. While little has actually come of these ministry pronouncements, they reinforce the widespread belief that NS teachers are preferable.

Arguments for and against native speaker teachers

The main argument given for employing NS teachers is that their English is better than that of non-native speakers. For example, their pronunciation meets accepted norms, their use of vocabulary is more appropriate and accurate, and they do not make grammatical mistakes.

This argument, however, may be invalid for two key reasons. Firstly, the accepted norms against which a speaker's language use can be compared may not actually favour NSs. Most learners of English in Thailand will use their English in Thailand, where they are more likely to need to communicate with other NNSs than with NSs. Thus, the end-goal of most English teaching in Thailand should be English as an International Language (EIL), defined as the use of English by speakers of different first languages to communicate with each other (McKay, 2002). Secondly, the assumption that NSs' English is necessarily 'better' than that of NNSs bears examining. Is the pronunciation of NSs really clearer? Do NSs really make no mistakes concerning vocabulary and grammar?

I will examine these two key arguments against employing NS teachers in more detail.

Teaching English as an International Language

English in Thailand is primarily used as a lingua franca between NNSs of English rather than as a means by which NSs and NNSs communicate. A few statistics bear this point out. The tourism sector is one of the main aspects of society where English is used widely. In 2001, about 50% of all tourist arrivals to Thailand were from East Asian countries with another 18% from Asean neighbours. In contrast, only 27% were from Europe, the Americas and Australasia, and only a proportion of these are likely to be NSs of English (Intarakomalyasut, 2001). In other words, well over three-quarters of tourists in Thailand are NNSs of English, and most communication between them and Thais is likely to be in English. Similar patterns also emerge concerning investments into Thailand and the import-export industry. Throughout all economic sectors, the predominant use of English is between NNS and NNS. Such usage reflects the worldwide use of English, where it is estimated that 80% of regular users of English are NNSs (Kachru, 1996).

The predominance of NNS-NNS use of English in Thailand means that the goal of learning English should be EIL rather than any NS norms of English. In EIL, the use of English is not connected to British or American culture (McKay, 2002), and thus using British or American standards for English is probably inappropriate (Honna and Takeshita, 2001). Instead, the standard NS norms for English should be viewed as possible varieties of EIL among a plethora of other possibilities.

The switch away from the NS as the end-goal of English language teaching (ELT) represents a clear paradigm shift. Until about ten years ago, the NS as goal was unquestioned in ELT. For example, the blurb for the *Collins COBUILD English Course* (Willis & Willis, 1988) states that the book "focuses on the real English that students will encounter and need to use", despite the fact that the book is based on the *COBUILD* corpus of NS-NS English usage. More recently, however, arguments have been put forward suggesting that competent NNSs are a more suitable model of proficiency than NSs.

The arguments in favour of NNS models for ELT fall into two categories. Firstly, the predominance of EIL vastly reduces the value of using NS models of competence (McKay, 2002). Secondly, for the overwhelming majority of learners, NS models present an unattainable goal for learning, especially for pronunciation (Jenkins, 2000). A model of a successful L2 learner of English, on the other hand, is by definition attainable and therefore makes a more realistic and motivating goal for learners (Cook, 1999). If we accept these arguments, the value of NS teachers of English is also greatly reduced.

Is native speaker English really error-free?

The second argument against using NS teachers questions the assumption that NSs use language correctly and produce error-free English. In considering NS errors, I will not examine the careless or intentional errors investigated by Eaves-Walton (1999), such as slips of the tongue and errors perpetrated to create effect. Instead, I will focus on those errors which seem to originate from insufficient competence in English.

When investigating NS teachers, these errors of insufficient competence fall into two categories. Firstly, there are the errors made when teaching, such as incorrect explanations of grammar points and attestations of erroneous rules. These errors are

usually due to the gap between being able to use English and being able to explain English, and highlight the need for NS teachers to improve their language awareness (see Grundy, 1995; Thornbury, 1997). Such errors also illustrate why being a NS is not a sufficient qualification for being a teacher.

The second kind of error of insufficient competence is those made by NSs when using the language for ordinary, everyday, real-world purposes. These language use errors of insufficient competence are the focus of the remainder of this article.

Collecting data of native speaker errors

To investigate errors of insufficient competence made by NSs, a corpus of NS use of English is needed. Since the rationale for conducting this investigation is to examine the suitability of NS teachers in Thailand, this corpus should comprise the language of NS teachers working in Thailand at present. To this end, a corpus of approximately 12,000 words of written English produced by NS teachers working in Thailand was collected from publicly accessible bulletin boards concerning ELT, such as those at www.ajarn.com and www.teflasia.com.

In constructing the corpus, the bulletin boards were chosen since the language used conformed to the norms of written English, rather than being the shortened forms found in Internet chatrooms. Contributions to the bulletin boards were chosen based on the likelihood that the writers were working in Thailand and were NSs. It was impossible to check whether this was true in every case, but each entry was considered on these bases.

Having constructed the corpus, it was examined for errors. In doing this, typographical mistakes were ignored as far as possible. For example, in examining the use of apostrophes, omission of apostrophes was only considered for those contributions which included the use of apostrophes elsewhere in the same text. Furthermore, extremely prescriptive grammar rules (such as the infamous split infinitive rule) were not applied in identifying errors. The errors identified can be classified as errors of vocabulary and of grammar.

Native speaker teachers' errors of vocabulary

Perhaps unsurprisingly, vocabulary errors largely concerned spelling rather than collocation or vocabulary choice. Indeed, throughout the whole corpus, there was not a single unambiguous example of a miscollocation and only one example of incorrect vocabulary choice:

... some of the **impressionable** resources, such as the video room.

There were, however, large numbers of spelling errors. Many of these (the total number in the corpus is 60) concerned words which are not very frequent in English, a selection of which are given below:

It would depend a lot on the **indevidual** student ...

I think as an **inexperienced** teacher ...

... until I gain the **experiance** and confidence ...

... losing it in **paridise** ...

Preperation is of course a must ...

... one of the most important **factors** in regards to time **manegement**.

A **comparisson** of accents ...
... to **annalize** as a class.
Those last **sujestions** were very helpful.
... any **unaccomadating** schools or institutions.
... it is such an **unproffessional** school.
... or, in my opinion, **bribary**.
... in **hind site** it has been worthwhile.
I was very analytical of the **instructors** ...
... might **eleviate** this feeling.
... it creates **unprompted** participation.
... changed the **tence** atmosphere ...
I try to **suppliment** the coursework.
... fails to achieve the desired **responce** ...
Will they be of benefit or **hinderence**?
... as **apposed** to a question.

More surprisingly, more common words in English also led to frequent spelling errors (the total number is 18):

All I ever **here** on this board is ...
... to be doing, **dispite** whether they are
... **useing** different pictures ...
... many students would ask **themselves** if ...
... it may be **easier** to tell a student ...
... but will not **allways** make enough ...
... the song "**All ways** look on the bright side of life".
I found the discussion very **usefull**.
I was really nervous about **becomming** a teacher.
... then youll **loose** interest from your students.
... as this **seams** to be an exam subject.
... to find out the rules of language for **themselves**.

While some of the errors for less common words could be viewed with sympathy, it is difficult to excuse the second group of errors when made by NSs who are teachers of English.

Native speaker teachers' errors of grammar

As with vocabulary, some aspects of grammar, such as syntax and tense choice, caused few or no problems. However, two areas in particular led to multiple instances of errors. The first concerns commonly confused words (the total number is 19):

Their not what I thought they are.
Your scary.
To me **their** a game for girls.
They don't know what **there** talking about!
Their thinking of more exciting things to do.
... the student sleeping obviously work's **to** hard.
You think he is too nice **too** be true.
... when I worked **their**, the gates ...
... hard to narrow it down as **there** all important.
I would of thought ...
I find **my self-defending** us all the time ...

The second aspect of grammar leading to errors is the use of apostrophes (the total number is 32):

- ... and the teacher **did'nt** have the lesson planned ...
- ... on what you should and **should'nt** do.
- .. with other westerners and **Thai's**.
- ... they are being disruptive to **other's**.
- I enjoyed reading **book's**, **comic's** etc.
- ... if you can find a book the **student's** are going to enjoy.
- ... the student sleeping obviously **work's** to hard.
- They **alway's** were at the end of the day.
- A taperecorder in the classroom has **it's** uses.
- ... taping **students** stories and playing ...
- ... leads into a preview of **todays** lesson.

As with vocabulary, perhaps incorrect use of apostrophes is forgivable, but some of the errors concerning commonly confused words are perhaps inexcusable for teachers.

Discussion

While the data above suggests that NS teachers cannot be relied on as models of English proficiency, there are some caveats concerning the data which strengthen the case for NS teachers.

Firstly, it should be noted that the errors shown above were made by only some of the contributors to the bulletin boards. In fact, roughly half of the regularly contributing NS teachers made no errors other than a few typos. Nevertheless, error-free proficiency in English, while relatively common, is not an attendant feature of being a NS. Secondly, the errors which were made do not clearly interfere with comprehension. For the vast majority of the errors shown above, it is relatively easy to identify what was intended in the contributions. The errors that NS teachers make, therefore, may be considered not very serious. Thirdly, the NS teachers' errors above are not the same types of errors as those which NNSs typically make. For example, while the majority of NS vocabulary errors concern spelling, NNSs are more likely to have problems with appropriate word choice – an aspect with which the NSs are fully proficient. We might argue that, if the differing strengths of NSs and NNSs were combined, we could attain error-free English proficiency.

In contrast to these caveats, it should be pointed out that only a tiny minority of NS teachers working in Thailand contributed to the bulletin boards. Since these contributing teachers chose to visit websites concerned with English teaching rather than on other topics and took the time to read others' contributions and make their own, it is likely that they are more interested in and dedicated to teaching than many other teachers who do not spend time discussing teaching. Given their interest and dedication, the contributing teachers may also make more effort to follow standard models of English than less interested non-contributing teachers. We might therefore expect that the English of the NS teachers collected in this study contains both fewer errors and less serious errors than might be contained in a corpus truly representative of the NS teaching population of Thailand.

Conclusion

From the errors of insufficient competence made by the NS teachers in the corpus, it can be seen that it should not be assumed that, purely because of their NS status, NS teachers are models of proficiency. Arguments favouring NS teachers based on the assumption that they are necessarily 'better' at English are therefore less persuasive than they might at first appear. Given that many NS teachers in Thailand view teaching as a source of income rather than a career and so may be less dedicated than their Thai counterparts, many of the commonly stated justifications for employing NS teachers are dubious.

This is not to say that there are no dedicated and proficient NS teachers – about half of the contributors to the bulletin boards would seem to be just that. Furthermore, there may be some non-linguistic advantages accruing to NS teachers. For example, many NS teachers use a very different teaching style and different techniques from most Thai teachers. Characteristics such as these may, in fact, be more valid justifications for employing NSs as teachers than language proficiency.

To summarise the arguments in this paper, simply being a NS does not guarantee proficiency in English and is not enough on its own to warrant employment as a teacher. While English proficiency is a key criterion for selecting teachers, it should not be used as a justification for restricting recruitment of teachers to NSs. At least as much attention should be paid to quality of teaching, dedication and willingness to develop, and these characteristics are at least as prevalent in NNSs as in NSs.

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Richard Watson Todd has been working at KMUTT for nearly fifteen years. His research interests are wide-ranging.