

Aeddán Shaw
Akademia Ignatianum w Krakowie
Filologia Angielska

The Natives are Revolting! Moving Beyond the NNEST/NEST Dichotomy in English Language Teaching¹

The Natives are Revolting!
Poza NNEST/NEST dychotomią
w nauczaniu języka angielskiego

KEYWORDS

NEST; NNEST;
reappropriation;
Native-Speakerism;
ELT

ABSTRACT

The issue of Native-Speakerism periodically rears its head in English Language Teaching and the profession as a whole is riven by a perceived split between “Native English Speaker Teachers” or NEST and “Non-Native English Speaker Teachers” or NNEST. Whilst in the early days of ELT there was a considerable bias towards the former and being a “native” enjoyed a considerable cachet, this article claims that the reality has changed dramatically and now we are only divided by the terms we use to describe ourselves rather than the reality. Drawing on data provided by Cambridge English and the author’s own research, the article examines the claims of Marek Kiczowski with regard to initial teacher training programmes and finds them

¹ This text is partially based on the author’s article entitled “The Return of the Native” which appeared in the 2016 Autumn edition of „The Teacher” magazine.

based on an outmoded and outdated picture of the profession and the programmes themselves. Finally, the article argues for the reappropriation of the term native in order to end the harmful NEST/NNEST dichotomy in ELT.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE ABSTRAKT

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Zagadnienie „Native-Speakerism” osadzone jest w obszarze Nauczania Języka Angielskiego (ELT). Wykonywanie zawodu nauczyciela języka angielskiego ulega podziałowi na dwie kategorie: pierwszą odzwierciedla pojęcie „*Native English Speaker Teachers*” – NEST; drugą jest „*Non-Native English Speaker Teachers*” – NNEST. Warto zauważyć, iż w początkowym rozumieniu pojęcia ELT było ono ukierunkowane i związane jednocześnie z zastosowaniem terminu „*native*”, które cieszyło się wyraźnym prestiżem. Artykuł ukazuje iż rzeczywistość w tym zakresie zmieniła się radykalnie i obecnie ten podział obszarowy odnosi się do określenia siebie w tych kategoriach a nie wspomnianej rzeczywistości. Sięgając do informacji zawartych w Cambridge English, oraz badań własnych autora, autor artykułu rozpatruje stwierdzenia postawione przez Marka Kiczkowiaka w związku z początkowo konstruowanymi programami nauczania języka angielskiego i odnajduje je w oparciu o przestarzały i nieaktualny już obraz wykonywanego zawodu nauczyciela języka angielskiego i programu jego nauczania. Podsumowując, autor artykułu podnosi kwestię ponownego, odpowiedniego zastosowania pojęcia „*native*” w celu zakończenia szkodliwej dychotomii terminów NEST/NNEST w ELT.

Following Silvana Richardson’s widely acclaimed plenary at IATEFL 2016, the debate over “Native-Speakerism” has sprung up once again, with numerous papers, blogs and opinion pieces following in its wake. Following hard on their heels have been a series of posts and articles² placing a large part of the blame at the door of initial teacher training courses such as CELTA. Traditionally, primary English language tuition was solely the preserve of the professional, an English graduate with 3-5 years of studies behind them and either a BA or an MA. Now, however, someone with a 4 week CELTA and a psychology course could be employed in the Polish state system to teach children under the same conditions as someone who had studied for 3 - 5 years. Some feel that this is a matter of CELTA being shown undue deference as a Cambridge qualification, itself symptomatic of a deeper, ingrained inferiority complex on

² With Tefl Equity Advocates and Hugh Dellar’s blog to the fore.

the part of the non-native BA or MA towards the “native-speaker” CELTA or, even worse, the systematic discrimination against the former in favour of the latter.

Whether one agrees with Marek Kiczowski that there is a complicity of silence surrounding the discrimination of Non-Native English Speaker Teachers (NNEST) or Scott Thornbury that it constitutes another of ELT’s ‘periodic bouts of hand ringing’³ over the issue, there is clearly a lot to discuss. The fact that some forms of discrimination exist is indisputable but what I would like to address here is the frankly bizarre idea that CELTA is somehow to blame. I will argue that much of the problem lies in the fact that Kiczowski and others have adopted an outmoded conception and division between two apparently separate species of teacher: low qualified, travelling “natives” and the higher qualified, stay at home “non-native” teachers. In reality, the truth is much more complex and the ELT profession is increasingly diverse, especially in the sense that many “NNESTs” moving beyond their “own” context and teaching internationally. The other issue lies in treating the idea that a certain level of language competence being necessary for teachers as some kind of tool of repression and that CELTA and the profession as a whole is somehow complicit in this. In fact, CELTA plays a key role in empowering “NNESTs” and countering the discrimination experienced by them and yet seems to be being made into a scapegoat. Finally, “Natives” invariably bear the brunt of the criticism levelled at the profession, regarded as latter-day colonists imposing their views on a repressed populace. However, as Davies put it, “The native-speaker boundary is, as we shall see, as much created by non-native speakers and by native speakers themselves”.⁴

I would like to begin with a brief critique of some of Marek Kiczowski’s main arguments in his paper entitled A NNEST perspective on teacher development: a complicity of silence?⁵, arguing that rhetoric such as his or Hugh Dellar’s threatens to undermine many “NNESTs” by depriving them of or devaluing the CELTA. Kiczowski is undoubtedly doing CELTA a disservice and, more importantly, attacking something which actively empowers “NNESTs”, damaging the cause that he advocates so strongly. I will end the paper by proposing an alternative framework and model built around the concept of reappropriation, wherein the concept of the “native” can be returned to use in identifying all ELT teachers with a given language level.

Kiczowski essentially makes four main claims in his paper, concerning hiring policies, ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) and World Englishes, teaching methods and challenging the idea that students want “NESTs”. Let us examine the last three

³ S. Thornbury, *An A to Z of ELT. A Dictionary of Terms and Concepts*. <https://scottthornbury.wordpress.com/2010/04/27/n-is-for-native-speakerism/> (accessed 21/02/17).

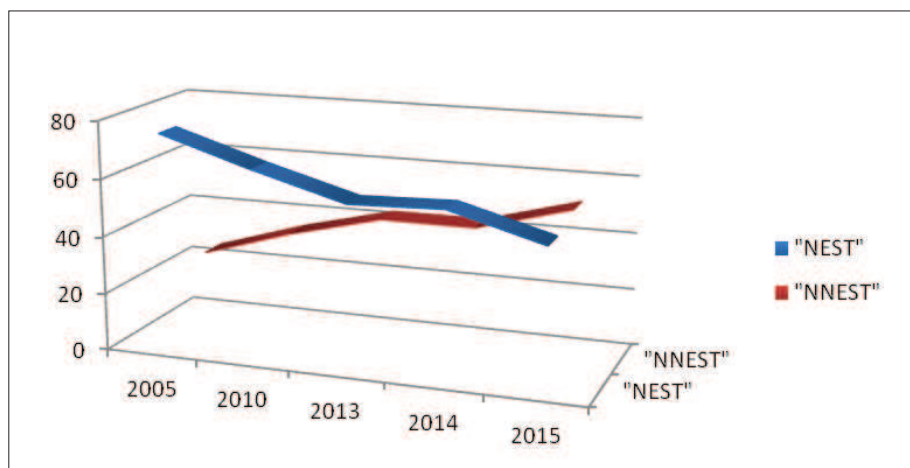
⁴ A. Davies, *The Native Speaker: Myth and Reality*. Multilingual Matters. 2003. p. 9.

⁵ M. Kiczowski, *IATEFL Teacher Development SIG Newsletter 73*. p. 8-9.

in turn in a little more detail – hiring policies will not concern us unduly here as, to a certain extent, this issue has ceased to be the obstacle it once was. Anti-discrimination legislation in the UK and the EU, for example, means that it is illegal to advertise and discriminate in favour of natives – formerly a common practice.

ELF and World Englishes

The near-mythical *bête noire* stalking the world of ELT is the monolingual, freshly qualified British or American male CELTA graduate with a patronising and imperialistic attitude towards the “locals” and who refuses to learn or use the L1 of the context he is teaching in. This is something which I find hard to square with the average candidate that I have worked with on CELTA courses in Poland, typically experienced teachers with a qualification in ELT, usually female and whose L1 is Polish. Data from Cambridge seems to bear this out:



source: Cambridge English Research, <http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/research-and-validation/research-and-collaboration/>

There has been a steady decline from CELTA being the preserve of the “NEST” to the situation last year when the majority of those taking the qualification were “NNEST”. If we consider the other hoary stereotype, that of the unqualified “NEST” versus the experienced and qualified “NNEST”, a different picture emerges to the

stereotype. Whilst approximately 50% of “NEST” candidates come to CELTA with no experience, so do 25% of “NNEST” applicants. Numbers with 1-2 and up to 3 years’ experience are comparable, with the difference emerging in the number of “NNEST” teachers with more than 3 years experience (approximately 50% of “NNEST” versus 25% “NEST” teachers).⁶

It should be borne in mind that these are global figures and that the majority of centres are to be found in the UK, USA, Australia and New Zealand and thus the numbers taking CELTA outside these countries might vary somewhat. It certainly seems to be the case that there are a growing number of “NNEST” teachers becoming CELTA qualified and being able to move out of their initial teaching context to teach abroad. In terms of World Englishes, this presents something of a conundrum – treating the issue as Kiczkowiak does, from the perspective of the inner circle versus the outer, is no longer adequate. When an inner circle variety is juxtaposed with an “outer circle” one, for Kiczkowiak, “what is deemed correct or an error becomes much less clear cut”⁷. This would seem to imply that we should accept that certain “errors” in one variety may be perfectly acceptable in another or that there is something “unique” which “NNEST” teachers all share and which “Natives” can never fully comprehend. This perspective is one echoed by a number in the field. For example, Robin Walker in *Teaching the Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca* repeats the claim that “Sadly, many native-speaker teachers enter the profession with little or no knowledge of the phonology of English”⁸ whilst “the non-native speaker teacher is inevitably better placed to teach ELF pronunciation”⁹ as a result of their (assumed) greater background knowledge and experiences of learning English.

What, however, when an outer circle variety encounters another, when a teacher of one variety of English teaches a class of learners who speak another? As we have seen, this is increasingly becoming the case yet whilst the Native is castigated for imposing their norms upon learners, what if this linguistic oppression comes from a “NNEST”?

I think it is more instructive to consider the following increasingly common situation. A CELTA-qualified teacher whose L1 is Polish begins working in Chile but, as yet, only speaks rudimentary Spanish. The 3rd person ‘s’ is often problematic for both Polish and Spanish learners so this would presumably be regarded as an error and corrected as per Walker and others notion of what constitutes the Lingua Franca Core or LFC. Yet what about the use of the colloquial definite article in Spanish when transferred to English e.g. let’s go with the Aeddan to the park? Is this an error

⁶ All data courtesy of a Cambridge English Research request, June 2016.

⁷ Kiczkowiak M., *IATEFL Teacher Development SIG Newsletter* 73, 2016.

⁸ R. Walker, *Teaching the Pronunciation of English as a Lingua Franca*. OUP. 2010. p. 68.

⁹ Ibid.

or an example from “just one of a multitude of Englishes” that Kiczowski envisages? Is there a difference between a British-born person correcting an example which is non-standard in his or her variety of English and a Pole? Is it imperialism in both cases and, if so, where does that leave us in terms of error correction? When one factors in certain traditional preferences towards correction then the picture becomes even more complex. In Poland, as with many learning contexts, correction is generally regarded as an essential part of the learning process and accuracy is highly valued. I would argue that, with apologies to Yeats, without a centre, things fall apart – the attributes and assets which make English a lingua franca are lost in the idea of World Englishes.

Teaching methods

As we have seen, “NNESTs” are increasingly to be found teaching beyond the “traditional” context of their L1 and using CELTA in much the same way as it has always been used – to teach and travel in different parts of the world. Candidates I have worked with in Poland and whose L1 is Polish are currently teaching in Chile, Thailand, China, Sri Lanka, the UK and Spain. Many already had a qualification in ELT, whether it is a BA or MA, and it is these qualifications that Dellar, for example, seems to think that CELTA undermines. Yet he does CELTA a grave disservice: it is an internationally benchmarked course which prepares candidates to work in a variety of different contexts while local programs vary in quality, intensity and focus. Taking the context that I work in as an example, you might study for 3 years for a BA in ELT – 2,110 hours on a typical BA. But of that, typically only 150 hours is teaching practice (less than 10%) – and this practice in turn varies tremendously, in some places unsupervised or even non-existent. Most hours on a typical BA in ELT are taken up by language related sessions rather than being solely dedicated to ELT methodology. It is also important to remember that it often encompasses observation and thus is not time in front of the blackboard. Dellar scoffs at 6 hours of teaching on a CELTA but omits the other 40 hours of observation of peers and experienced teachers that one does, bringing the course closer to that of most national TT programs. He also chooses to overlook the fact that many trainers often utilise loop input, increasing the practical extent of CELTA even further, whilst many of the hours on a BA or MA are in the form of theoretical lectures. Finally, the quality and focus is there in the TP component of CELTA – guaranteed by independent, external assessors, many of whom are “NNESTs”. Dellar accuses CELTA of “being inadequate preparation for the realities of teaching”¹⁰ but its practical emphasis, the linking of theory and

¹⁰ <http://www.lexicallab.com/2016/04/celta-the-native-speaker-bias-and-possible-paths-forward/> (accessed: 21.02.17)

practice and observation actually help teachers to develop. It should not be forgotten that CELTA makes no claims to produce “finished” teachers – as if you could have such a thing – and that even a Pass candidate will need support and assistance after the course, but it does show that someone is capable of delivering lessons to a certain international standard.

However, this in itself furnishes a key objection to CELTA from Kiczkowiak, namely that its methodology is Anglocentric and shows a disregard for local educational traditions. This perhaps stems from perceptions concerning CLT 15-20 years ago and particularly those concerning the use of L1 in the classroom. I would argue that this argument has been won resoundingly by the L1 camp and rightly so – it can be a very useful tool when all of the learners share an L1. What is unclear is what other “local traditions” Kiczkowiak has in mind that are threatened by a learner-centered, communication-focused philosophy which is guided by principled eclecticism – a broad church which encourages diversity and experimentation. This would seem to suggest that Kiczkowiak is advocating the opposite – a teacher-centered, accuracy focused approach which is “traditional”.

What the CELTA prepares graduates for is to teach in different contexts where they do not necessarily share an L1 with the learners or where the learners do not share an L1. Not focusing on using L1 to a large extent on CELTA courses just makes sense – we are usually working with multilingual, multinational and multicultural groups of teachers and hence the need for skills which can be utilised in a variety of contexts. This isn't native speakerism or an Anglo-centric agenda at work but a practical, logical response to a situation. These are techniques and skills (and practice!) that a Polish teacher working in Chile needs just as much as an American if they do not speak Spanish. Criticising CELTA for not prioritising L1 use in the classroom is missing the point – it was devised to help teachers work internationally *where the knowledge of the L1 was not a prerequisite*.

Finally, and most importantly, more and more “NNESTs” are coming to CELTA without a background in Philology or Applied Linguistics. They are people with a good level of English who want to try teaching, to change careers or support themselves while living in a different country – in other words, the stereotypical CELTA candidate except their first language isn't English. They bring a wealth of life experience, ideas and specialist knowledge to the profession – just because you have an MA in Applied Linguistics, doesn't mean that you can teach a Business English class on negotiation better than someone who actually negotiated business deals for a living. Yet Dellar's scathing treatment of CELTA, and particularly his misplaced notion that most people taking CELTA are unqualified natives, would deprive both students and teachers of this opportunity. If one only has philologists teaching English, you only attract a certain kind of person to the profession and a diverse body of teachers with

different life experiences, previous careers and educational backgrounds is undoubtedly a more attractive option for teachers and learners alike. If the typical teacher goes straight from school to university and then to teach, there they undoubtedly lack life experience. CELTA, on the other hand, is a gateway and a passport for people of all nationalities and L1's with different life experience and which allows them to enter the English teaching profession.

Students want NESTS

It would seem that both Kiczkowiak and Richardson are right to suggest that this is a fallacy, largely perpetuated by school owners rather than NESTs themselves. This is rooted in the same soil as Medgyes' famous remark that "NESTs and non-NESTs use English differently and, therefore, teach English differently"¹¹, and was behind the origin of tandem teaching and the glorification of the native. Students want good teachers – but neither Kiczkowiak nor Dellar seem to put forward a positive vision of what this might mean, with Dellar being particularly scathing.

Conclusions

I believe that the fault here lies in the paradigm of NEST vs NNEST and not accepting that language competence is just like any other aspect of teaching – it is not the most important, not the least. It is something for teachers to develop, work on and extend, regardless of their L1 – like classroom management, rapport or lesson planning. It is about moving away from language competence as our gauge of a teacher and looking more at language awareness instead. Consider a sensitive matter such as accent, for example. Today, there are few who would seriously expect "NNESTs" or, indeed, "NESTs" to utilise RP. However, if one's accent places undue strain on the interlocutor, this is a matter for development, regardless of whether someone is from Newcastle, Nowy Sącz or New Delhi. In my experience, this has tended to be standard practice on CELTA courses too, with "NESTs" with strong accents being encouraged to adjust their delivery just as much as "NNESTs". It is covered by the assessment criteria in the most unAnglocentric terms possible – "adjusting their own use of language in the classroom according to the learner group and the context" – and is a good example of how CELTA does not discriminate but is more interested in producing effective teachers.

We need to see teachers not as separate species but as a sum of our parts. As teachers, we all come with different strengths, different areas to develop and with different

¹¹ P. Medgyes, *Native or Non-Native: Who's Worth More?* *ELT J* 1992; 46 (4): 340-349.

experiences and backgrounds – yet we are all united as teachers. We are a multifaceted mosaic – and we should discern these differences, celebrating them where appropriate and working on them where necessary. A “NEST” is not a born teacher – but “NNESTs” aren’t either. “NEST’s” might need to work on their language awareness (just because you speak it, doesn’t mean you can teach it) whilst “NNESTs” may need to focus more on language development (just because you teach it, doesn’t mean you speak it). Both may need to work on their accents so that they are able to teach across contexts and without placing undue strain on their interlocutors.

In their place I would like to propose something which I have been practicing on CELTA for some years now: repurposing the word “native”, not in the sense that the Cambridge English Dictionary puts it, as “someone who has spoken a particular language since they were a baby, rather than having learned it as a child or adult” but in the sense that they speak the language just as well (and just as badly) as someone who has spoken the language from birth, with all its glorious variety. This is an opinion shared by Walkinshaw, amongst others, and is supported by his claim that: “the sheer number of highly articulate expert non-native speakers in the ELT profession and in the academic field of applied linguistics refutes this notion. We contend that once an L2 learner reaches what Cook (1999) calls the “final” stage of language acquisition (which Cook notes is very difficult to define), the difference between native competence and advanced non-native competence is negligible.”¹²

Much in the same way as other formerly offensive terms have been reclaimed over the last 30-40 years, I believe that reappropriating the term native will create a more empowering, useful paradigm than the out of date distinction between NEST and NNEST. Why not reclaim the term non-native speaker, especially as it would be truer of the principles of reappropriation? I would argue that the more dangerous and destructive term has been native – it perhaps lacks the pejorative sense of non-native but, more importantly, if we all adopt it, regardless of our L1, then it loses its cachet, the individual cannot be punished if they are protected by the crowd. In closing, I believe an analogy from the film *Spartacus* may be instructive. At the end of the famous film starring Kirk Douglas, the rebel Spartacus and his defeated army are told that if they give up their leader, they will be allowed to live and only Spartacus will be executed. Spartacus, wanting to save his followers from crucifixion, says “I’m Spartacus”, a cry echoed and taken up by all of his followers, who in turn want to save him from his suffering. This could be ELT’s “Spartacus” moment, a time to revolt and resist. After all, if we all claim to be native, surely this outdated, outmoded and harmful dichotomy will cease to have as much power and influence.

¹² I. Walkinshaw, *Native- and Non-Native Speaking English Teachers in Vietnam: Weighing the Benefits*. December 2012–Volume 16, Number 3. TESL-EJ.

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ADRES DO KORESPONDENCJI

ADDRESS FOR CORESPONDENCE

Dr Aeddan Shaw
Akademia Ignatianum w Krakowie
Filologia Angielska
e-mail: aeddan_shaw@hotmail.com