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ILARIA POLITO

## Native and non-Native Speaker Teacher: an ‘in tandem’ model in teaching English as a Foreign Language

### *Abstract*

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Italy’s language institutes and centres, while being a non-native speaker, has long raised questions over the nature of a teacher’s language competence. A form of discrimination against non-native English speaker teachers (NNEST) subsists, predominantly with regard to their linguistic-communicative proficiency, seen as a paradigmatic feature of teaching a second language. This study, precisely in an attempt to overcome such a contention, proposes a more constructive stance on the issue by reporting the experience of an English teaching practice to adult learners undertaken by the Language Centre (CLA) of the University of Salerno.

### *Keywords*

Native vs. non-native teachers, language proficiency, didactic model, teaching practice

### *1. Introduction*

Beginning with the observation of the “dimension” of English as a global language, the paper first looks at the controversial view on the nature of the proficiency of Italian native speaker (NNEST) and English native speaker (NEST) teachers and trainers, which qualifies them for the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL), in order to prompt a dual perspective. Two paragraphs then follow: the first that turns attention to learning choices and the importance that the requirement for a native or non-native speaking teacher be valued by the recipient of the training action (learner, student or trainee). The second, prompting a brief digression on theoretical principles developed by linguists Stephen Krashen and Rod Ellis, introduces some of the underlying components of “knowing how to teach” a non-native foreign language learned in one’s home country. This then leads to the pivotal issue of this paper, which, intercepting the rather widespread tendency to look at the language competencies of NNESTs with suspicion in favour of NESTs, intends to report the example of a teaching model piloted and consolidated in the years 2007-2011, in the multimedia laboratories of the Language Centre (CLA) of the University of Salerno. The model that is here called “in tandem” has been applied to both general English classes and language courses for the UCLES (University

of Cambridge) international certificates, as aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Lastly, the value of the experience is recalled in the conclusions with the aim of suggesting that the expertise of the partners involved in such an educational situation can be enhanced, not only individually and separately, but as a result of the activities implemented in a collaborative and complementary form for the same educational goal.

## *2. English is a global language*

The extent to which English as a foreign language is widespread globally comes to us from an objective fact: English language in the world is estimated to involve a total of far more than 1.5 billion speakers, of whom about 380 million native speakers use it as a first language. The figures<sup>1</sup> thus inform us that the ratio between native and non-native speakers is approximately 1 to 5, i.e., for every native speaker, there are 5 speakers in the world who have learned English, in different ways, as a second or foreign language.<sup>2</sup> In contemporary society, the spread of the English language and of Anglophones on a global scale undoubtedly represents a powerful phenomenon in the capacity to monopolize different sociolinguistic areas such as the sciences, technology, media, political and economic communication. The evidence connected with this phenomenon highlights the importance and impact that non-native speakers inevitably produce both on language use, spoken and written, and on the dynamics in their communication with native speakers. In a professional or socio-cultural context involving both of them, for example, the non-native speaker will tend to express themselves more purposefully and attentively, and will succeed in communicating effectively even using simple and limited language, saving time and avoiding misunderstandings and miscommunication. When looking at it from an English language teaching perspective, it can be observed that, quite frequently, a native teacher will find themselves faced with the need to adjust the way they communicate and teach in an effort to make themselves better understood. They will try making various small “adjustments” that are more conducive to a non-native learner, such as regulating the speed of their speech, or reducing the use of phrasal verbs or idiomatic expressions in favour of linguistic and cultural references more intelligible and closer to a lingua franca (M. Santipolo 2021), or a common language of contact within groups speaking different native languages. This implication leads to the claim that the role of native speakers is thus downsized, or in some situations, including language teaching, that native speakers are somewhat deprived of their central role. In this framework, which also involves the cross-cultural nature of the communication taking place, such dynamics are not seen as a limitation but rather

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<sup>1</sup> Ethnologue, <https://www.ethnologue.com/guides/ethnologue200>.

<sup>2</sup> In this regard, a classification of English speakers in the world is found in Kachru's model known as the “Three-circle model of World Englishes”.

turned into opportunities to create value for individuals, teachers and learners, and for the learning environment in which they move.

### 3. *The learner's choice*

It is likewise well established that a native speaker receives the widest appreciation and acceptance among learners, serving as a paradigmatic linguistic model due to their innate ability pertaining to their linguistic-communicative competence and capacity to master their mother tongue in its structures, functions and forms, with fluent, accurate and articulate language, rich in countless idiomatic expressions pronounced flawlessly. Learners who choose a native speaker teacher (Gurkan and Yuksel 2012) yearn to be able to express themselves in the same way, with the correct intonation, self-confidence, sentence construction, and the naturalness that makes the linguistic act feel more authentic and similar to the language spoken outside classroom practice. Accordingly, choosing a learning path and, primarily, a teacher deemed most qualified for the role and effective for the goal, is a crucial aspect, but not the only one.

A number of international papers are devoted to the NEST/NNEST dichotomy and its impact on teacher training. Benke E. and Medgyes P. (2005), investigate their differences in an attempt to test whether they are, as viewed by NS and NNS teachers respectively, in line with students' perceptions. Others report on the reasons of those who support the former, as in Florence Ma, L. P. (2012), who analyzes semi-structured group interviews conducted with students in three different schools in Hong Kong that implemented the Native English Teachers (NETs) Scheme<sup>3</sup> for years, and assesses their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of learning English from NETs or local English teachers (LETs); or, conversely, of those who also promote the latter, as in Levis, J. M., Sonsaat, S., Link, S., & Barriuso, T. A. (2016). The authors here point out that NESTS' pronunciation is appraised by the students involved as a point of strength over NNESTs, who may be perceived as inadequate due to different L2 accents. At the same time, they argue that teaching English as a second language (ESL) in addition to focusing on pronunciation also poses other challenges, including, the creation of contextually appropriate materials, teaching methods, adequate pedagogical content knowledge, and assessment and monitoring of the learning process.

Learner's views in international studies are elicited and analyzed through surveys and questionnaires. For example, D. Lasagabaster and J.M. Sierra, (2005:222-225) in their research formulate a series of hypotheses aimed at gathering students' views on certain issues, including preferences expressed for specific domains and skills: (NEST) vocabulary, pronunciation, speaking, culture; (NNEST) grammar

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<sup>3</sup> Introduced since 1998, it allows Hong Kong government-subsidized primary and secondary schools to hire English teachers from abroad in order to provide local students with authentic English language exposure aimed at cultural enrichment.

and learning strategies. When faced with the choice between NEST and NNEST, students substantially favour NEST (60.6%), however, it is worth noting that when they are given the opportunity to access learning situations involving both categories of teachers, a higher percentage of appreciation is obtained (71.6%). At the same time, it should be mentioned that according to other studies reporting more comprehensive observations and evaluations, students also value additional teachers' traits that have nothing to do with "being native", such as in Moussu & Llurda (2008); Pacek (2005); Walkinshaw & Duong (2012) wherein experience, preparation, and qualifications are indicated as more influential factors, and Liang (2002) and Selvi (2010) who corroborate teachers' level of professionalism rather than their ethnic or linguistic origin. As mentioned, this is a disputed topic that has been examined in the literature for decades and with different approaches. Medgyes, P. (1992), for example, in his *Native or non-native: Who's worth more?* maintains, taking a liberal stance, that it is more useful not to ignore the differences and divergences between the two, and instead make the teachers themselves aware of their own limitations as well as potential, seeking the right mix of collaboration for a joint teaching pattern. Also, for Tosuncuoglu (2017), in an ideal ESL language course the two teachers coexist and complement each other, ensuring effective teaching based on their different backgrounds.

#### 4. *What teaching principles for a Foreign/Second Language (FL/L2)?*

At the outset, this study supports that: i) both NS/NNS trainers can be equally important to an effective language course and able to provide value to the learning process in different and complementary ways; ii) knowing how to teach an FL/L2 requires disciplinary, intercultural and pedagogical knowledge as much as the necessary language skills.

In this perspective, the classroom lectures still play a central role, if modelled on the concept of "active learning" (e.g., cooperative learning/laboratory teaching), and focus on interaction with and by the learner. Furthermore, while according to Krashen's Second Language Acquisition (S.L.A) Theory, there are two different processes when learning a (foreign) language: a) acquisition, which occurs spontaneously, automatically and unconsciously, as it is based on affective and communicative interaction in a language; b) learning, which, conversely, takes place by means of studying language forms and content; when it comes to effective teaching, it is useful to refer to some of the 'Principles of instructed language learning' outlined by linguist Rod Ellis, including the following:

- *Principle 6: Successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input*

Emphasis here is on the importance of input to develop the implicit knowledge necessary for the learner to communicate effectively in L2.

Extensive input: a) Maximizing the use of L2 within the classroom. Ideally, this means that using L2 should be the means as well as the object of instruction; b)

creating opportunities for learners to experiment with the language and receive input beyond class time, such as by making additional materials and resources available and training students on how to use them effectively, or, possibly, by establishing self-access resource rooms.

- *Principle 9: Instruction needs to take account of individual differences in learners.*

There are universal and distinguishable features related to the acquisition of an LS and/or L2, on the other hand substantial variability exists in terms of speed of learning and final achievements.

When considered from this standpoint, the teacher, both L1 and L2 native speakers, is rather called upon to use language strategies that are appropriate and functional to the development of the learner's linguistic proficiency, and which necessarily involve interaction between the two different cultures, languages and linguistic variations<sup>4</sup> they belong to.

### 5. *The 'In Tandem' Model*

The teaching model stems from the decision made by CLA at the University of Salerno, to launch an English language teaching formula between 2007 and 2012 referred to as "in tandem" due to the presence of two trainers and partners. The following overview, therefore, is the result of first-hand and personal experience gained within the Language Centre's multimedia labs, as a trainer and partner in English language courses aimed at university students and researchers, but also teaching and administrative staff, internal and external to the university.

Attendance of language courses included:

- a placement test, to assess learners' proficiency level and create homogeneous groups;
- a total of 100 hours, consisting of 80 hours of face-to-face classes, and 20 hours for self-access, at the dedicated Assisted Practice Lab, with a language tutor and access to specific materials;
- two classes a week for a total of 6 hours (3 + 3);
- two trainers or experts, English native speakers and Italian native speakers, evenly splitting the hours on a rotational basis (upon completion of the first part, carried out by one of the two partners, class was resumed by the other one who continued the classroom activities).

A large number of students were involved in the tandem training, each group consisting of 20 to 30 participants.

As such, the courses, arranged by level (A2, B1, B2 and C1) and type (general English classes or ESOL exam preparation courses) were delivered by at least 4 pairs of trainers, including native English experts of different nationalities (British,

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<sup>4</sup> Specifically, *diatopic*, *diaphasic*, and *diamesic variation*.

American and Australian), and native Italian speakers with the required academic qualifications, skills, certificates and foreign language teaching experience.

### 5.1 Partners in tandem

The teacher/partner relationship is one of the most compelling sides of working in tandem, because of the possibility for each to cooperate and interact to the best of their expertise and aptitude both when planning the teaching session and, occasionally, in the classroom.

Collaboration among partners in our case was organized into three moments:

1. weekly work plans, to plan activities in mutual continuity, and keep track of each other's work in order to ensure consistent alignment and exchange: the making of work plans thus becomes an opportunity for sharing and confrontation, bringing personal qualities and professional ability to the table, and through which synergies and goals can be developed;
2. partner rotation in-between the two parts of the class, reporting on the activities carried out, providing updates or pointing out special situations and needs, discussing group or individual progress and difficulties, making suggestions, assessing class participation and "sentiment";
3. participation in the class held by the other partner (with or without interaction between the two partners and the class), with the aim of getting to know each other's best-performing modes, helping each other to revise and improve the classroom activity, getting into the learning situation and witnessing "on the ground" the different teaching styles and approaches practiced by each partner and, then, effectively building a proactive and collaborative team.

## 6. *Observations and feedback on the implemented model*

Feedback, suggestions, and comments were expressed by the students, both during and more formally at the end of the course, by responding to a questionnaire (semi-structured and in an anonymous form) assessing the language training they had received, and according to a few parameters:

- appraisal of trainers' performance, both in tandem and individually;
- effectiveness of the training action and organization.

The assessment questionnaire tool was given due consideration by the University Language Centre here as a "thermometer" of the reactions and opinions of the training recipients. Participants' responses helped to understand how the model was perceived and what kind of impact it was likely to have. Once tested, the model was then adopted in later years as well. Hence, it is safe to assume that it elicited student approval or, in general, reasonably positive feedback.

Although detailed data and numbers are not reported here, feedback on the applied model received from the trainees bear the following observations:

- perceived as an *increased trigger for learning* due to the alternating presence of both English and Italian native speaker partners, thus enabling learners to get



into the structures and sounds of the language with a dual approach, i.e., immersive and focused for the former and “mediated” for the latter;

- welcomed as a *novelty*, also providing a *more personalized learning situation* from which they could gain the most benefits and results;
- seen as a truly *international moment of aggregation and sharing*, and of mutual challenge between each other and the two teachers.

The experience also provided insight into how students related to both of them, highlighting specific features that they recognized and attributed to the native English speaker and the native Italian speaker, respectively.

### 6.1 Native English speaker teacher / NEST

The features that students most associated with NEST are basically identified with the idea of a *model* they could learn from in order to:

- empower their foreign language skills to the fullest and get in touch with the most authentic expression of cultural elements and connections with distinctive Anglophone customs and traditions. During classes, the NEST could recount stories, anecdotes, insights about the lifestyle of their home country;
- capture, absorb and imitate their pronunciation, intonation and accent with the intention of speaking more fluently and with no hesitation and errors. They also enjoyed plenty of vocabulary, idiomatic expressions and slang. The NEST was able to provide many examples, which are more rarely learned from books, arousing interest among the learners;
- comprehend the diverse lexical and semantic nuances that a native speaker with his or her linguistic intuition is able to convey in conversation. In the classroom, the learners frequently found themselves asking for alternative ways they could use and utter single words or phrases; these prompts were easily met by the native speaker with a variety of synonyms and patterns, or expressions that “sound good”, as a more natural idiom.

### 6.2 Non-native English speaker teacher / NNEST

The features and strengths most valued by learners for the native Italian teacher relate to the idea of being an *example and witness* of first-hand experience in FL/L2 learning. The NNEST has certainly experienced the target language learning process themselves, with all the steps, challenges and most effective strategies to use along the way. Consequently, he or she is:

- fully aware of the pitfalls and obstacles encountered while studying and practicing English as a native Italian speaker, and what efforts and methods should be enacted;
- because of that common learning experience, the NNEST is capable of predicting, understanding and helping to overcome learning difficulties when dealing with grammar or syntax of the foreign language that, for native Italian learners, is more obscure or distant from their own language. This was the case, for exam-

ple, with ‘false friends’, with more complex verb tenses and patterns, progressive forms, and so forth;

- able to introduce grammar in a very clear and organized way. Since they have been studied and learned, grammatical structures become easier to explain, break down and reduce into more “logical” and understandable rules;
- empathetic. The non-native teacher tends to be attentive and sympathetic to students who are having a harder time making progress, and who, for that reason, are either experiencing frustration or showing a decline in motivation.

## 7. *Conclusions*

This paper set out from the perspective of describing a model for the tandem teaching of English as a foreign language, thus creating a meeting point between the possible divergences or the most qualifying features of NEST and NNEST. This experience conducted by the university language centre was marked by the cooperation, flexibility and complementarity of the teachers’ activities, and was a *unicum* in terms of the way the training action was implemented. While teamwork fostered communication and sharing, driving the two partners toward a deeper sensitivity and readiness for mutual support and understanding of the learner, the model certainly contributed to the growth and enhancement of each other’s respective and more identifying professional competencies. The results of such teaching practice can be read in terms of the learners’ achievements as well as their appreciation for such a model. From this, we can also welcome the added value derived from the co-participation of the two experts for the benefit of being able to more effectively intervene in the foreign language learning experience, and to act as a further motivational stimulus for the learner.

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