



**THE MYTH OF NATIVE SPEAKERS AND NATIVE SPEAKERISM IN
COSTA RICA**

ESTUDIANTE

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Final Essay

The Myth of Native Speakers and Native Speakerism in Costa Rica

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Abstract

Speaking English has become the universal language which people use to communicate, nonetheless to what extent do second language learners should master English to the point of having “Native” like mastery. This essay inquires the problematic of native speakers and native speakerism and how it affects Second Language Learners (SLL) and Second Language Teachers (SLT). Also this essay describes some of the myths that exist behind the Native Speaker’s teaching methodology and sheds light on how these myths reproduce discrimination towards SLL/SLT.

Keywords: native speakers, non-native speakers, native speakerism, English teaching

Introduction

Speaking English has become a necessity for Costa Rican people nowadays due to the requirements national and international companies currently have regarding proficiency in this language. Due to this need, people have started to invest even more in their education, such as private schools, bilingual schools, and language institutes so that they can learn

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easy, fast, and good English. Nonetheless, there have been some assumptions that have affected non-native speakers (NNSs) few of them include: learning from native speakers (NSs) would be much better than NNS, good English and good practices come from NS, and learning will be better because natives know more, thus linguistic aspects are better if they come from them.

With this in mind, three possible statements will be discussed: First, the concept of what good English is will be questioned. Second, some of the myths hidden behind the terminology of Native Speakers and its definition will be discussed, and third, the definition of *native speakerism*, how it started, positive and negative repercussions in the non-native community, and non-native teachers' discrimination will be addressed.

The Native Speaker

The first recorded description of the native speaker is mentioned by Davies (1993) who stated that "the first language a human being learns to speak in his native language; he is native of this language" (p. 9). Pennycook (1994) also described a native speaker as the "idealized person with the complete possible innate competence in the language" (p. 175). Notwithstanding, a more simplistic definition of NS and NNS is offered by Braine (2010), who described the NS as someone who can speak the language as their first language and the NNS as the one who uses the language as a second or foreign tongue.

The native/non-native dichotomy is a complex area in linguistics due to the connotations it contains; as Braine (2010) explained, the term *native* does have a positive and better connotation: it denotes "birthright, fluency, cultural affinity, and sociolinguistic competence," while the term "non-native" denotes "minority, or marginalization and stigmatization, with the result of discrimination in terms of employability and professional advancement" (p. 9). Nonetheless, Murti (2002) made an interesting observation in recent

history which describes how the “native” terminology was used as a negative connotation to refer to “uncivilized” or “barbaric” people (p. 27).

Competence and credibility given to non-native teachers and students are some of the negative aspects that the native speaker’s myth encloses. Widdowson (1994) reinforced this thought of the NS stating that native speakers are the “authentic owners” (p. 387) of the English language, and, therefore, they are linguistically competent. In the same line, Suarez (2000) argued that native speakers are certainly considered more competent than non-native speakers; they are more trusted and less questioned in terms of language. This ideology causes non-native teachers to feel inferior to native teachers. This same thought is supported by Todd (2006), as mentioned above: NNS teachers are even discriminated against from hiring processes just by the fact of not being NS of English. This problem not only happens to NNTs in their country but also in English Speaking countries even though they are certified as English teachers or if they have degrees in English Teaching.

What is Good English?

When thinking about good English, people usually think about native speakers (NSs) -people from the USA, for example- whose grammar and pronunciation are (apparently) impeccable. In fact, whenever people talk about good English, they mostly refer to accurate use of linguistic aspects, such as pronunciation (phonetics), words (morphology), phrases, sentences (syntax), the meaning of phrases and sentences (semantics), and meaning of the context of discourse (pragmatics). And usually, people think these linguistic aspects only come in better if it is from NSs; even without any argument that supports it; many people believe in that. This idea has been so widespread that even many language schools explicitly state in their hiring posts that they only employ NS teachers (Todd, 2006), which discriminates against non-native speakers (NNS) as well as reinforcing Native Speakerism.

In the same line, another assumption people have is that “good” English comes from NS because “they provide a better model of English” (Todd, 2006, p. 1). Nonetheless, as Todd (2006) stated, NSs “do not provide a truly proficient model of English” (p. 1), and he even affirmed that based on analysis of a corpus of informal NS teacher writing, their English proficiency is dubious. In this article, Todd (2006) quoted some of the answers received in some letters that came in the Bangkok post; here are some of them:

“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.” (p. 1)

One of the first aspects that make the term “good English” even more questionable is its usage. Almost a century ago, Fries (1925), a language teacher and a structural linguist, debated that it was often taken for granted that language is correct only if it complies with the rules and that these rules were accepted as a measure of good and wrong, meaning that if they were used by many, then it would be considered correct (even more if it was used by scholars at that time).

In addition, in his article Fries (1925) argued, for example, whether the use of “he don’t” should be condemned as correct or incorrect which normally would be thought that is incorrect. Nonetheless, nowadays correct or incorrect it is used by many people native and non-native regardless of their academic background and the reason why of its use.

Another aspect that makes us doubt the definition of *good English* is the accent and English variation that exists around the globe. This variation exists according to the state or community you belong to; as Crystal (2017) stated, people’s accent is usually influenced by some sort of local variation and even more when people move around the country, so they accommodate it to the place and people they are surrounded by, he referred to the actors

and actresses that were influenced by the need of knowing more accents and variations so they could get roles either in movies or plays. Crystal (2012) also stated that English will open to new winds in linguistics due to its own global spread as well as the emergence of new varieties of English in the different territories where the language has taken root.

Taken from this perspective, good English does not really exist. *Good English* is only part of an ambiguous ideology in favor of those in power. When these aspects are questioned *Good English* becomes part of the myth that there is only one kind of English and that it is more valuable than the variations that exist. As Crystal (2012) mentioned there are many variations in English and there will be even more variations and *New Englishes* due to globalization as well as having English as a lingua franca.

The Myth of the Native Speaker and Arguments that Support It

Some of the arguments educational schools and people that support NSs are that their English is better than that of NNSs in terms of pronunciation, their use of vocabulary is better and more accurate, and they do not make mistakes (Todd, 2006). However, the questions that arise with these assumptions are if they really do not make mistakes or if their pronunciation really is the best one. As Crystal (2017) stated, pronunciation has always changed due to the variations that exist in the USA as well as in other parts of the world where English is predominant. Crystal (2017) also mentions in his article that not only do we need to highlight the existence of language variation but also the nature of language change.

Another question pointed out is if NNSs really have to learn the native pronunciation (Timmis, 2002; Todd, 2016). As teachers, we find students that face difficulties in pronunciation and others for whom it is easier. We also find students wishing to sound, to be like a native and some others that do not want to fit in those two categories, therefore, as Cook (1999) stated students should not become an imitation of the native speakers but someone that can be between both languages using them when appropriate. This should be

the focus when teaching a second language, giving the students the opportunity to stand between both languages without pressuring them to sound or being like *natives*.

Native Speakerism

Regarding native speakerism, it is a disruptive force that arises within educational cultures in the English-speaking West as well as “an established belief that ‘native speaker’ teachers represent a ‘Western culture’ from which spring the ideals of both the English language and English language teaching methodology” (Holliday, 2006, p. 385). Lowe and Kiczkowiak (2016) described native speakerism as a widespread ideology in English Language Teaching (ELT), in which those who are “native” speakers of English are perceived as better language models as well as exhibit a superior Western teaching methodology than the ones that are ‘non-native speakers’ (p. 2).

Lowe and Kiczkowiak (2016) also claimed that native speakerism makes use of an “us” and “them” dichotomy, in which non-native speakers are taken culturally inferior and where they need training into the “correct” method, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary which is led by NSs. Native speakerism also makes great use of what Holiday (2013) defined as “a cultural disbelief,” which is the distrust that ‘non-native speakers’ can make meaningful contributions to ELT. Therefore, this ideology focuses on the benefit of *native speakers* which also uses bias and stereotypes to group people in native or native speaker side (Holiday, 2015).

The impact of native speakerism as Holiday (2006) stated can be seen from many aspects of “professional life, employment policy to the representation of language” (p. 385). This is also supported by Todd (2006) when he stated that in Thailand, even for kindergarten levels, many schools only employ NS teachers. This also happens in Costa Rica; we can find many posts in which they are looking for NSs only, or they state that a “native-like” proficiency is required. Moreover, many teachers are asked to have a C1 performance level

on the TOEIC exam (Test of English for International Communication), which has become a requirement to apply to most teaching positions. This C1 certification gives you a standard and value as a teacher; it means that your linguistic skills have this so-called native-like control in the language, which again, is necessary to apply to many of the jobs posted and sometimes not even with the certification.

As a teacher, there have been several times in which I was rejected by some institutes because I was not a native speaker; therefore, I was taken out of the hiring process. I have also received comments from native teachers about my accent, and there have been some times in which Costa Rican teachers stated that I must get the C1; otherwise, I will not get the job because even though my teaching skills are great and my speaking skills too, they need the certification saying I have the “native-like” proficiency or so almost like a certification that validates me and gives me the value as a teacher.

The problem that arises is that these thoughts and categorization have seemed to penetrate NNS teachers and students’ minds as well as language schools and with no fundament stating what is good and what is not, what is valuable and what is not. Therefore, it is not enough four or six years to get the degree that certifies people as teachers, but they have to go to a private institution, pay a high amount of money, –that not all people can afford- try to get the C1 and renew it every two years.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Almost every day, students ask me how they can get that “native-like” level which really seems to worry them, and my question has always been why? What is the core reason for my students’ desire to have a “native-like” level? And what does it mean to have that level? Students seem to be more anxious about being/sounding like a native more than focusing on good communication. Based on this issue, it is recommendable for teachers to focus more on teaching how to effectively communicate rather than trying to sound like

“native speakers”. Notwithstanding, there should not be any bias or imposture from teachers towards any of the sides, the student solely has to decide whether to practice and study hard to get the native-like proficiency or learn proficient English for communication purposes.

It is also advisable for teachers to open paths for different kinds of Englishes as well as accents, exposing students to these varieties that exist, and teaching them what really matters, which is communication. Also, making students aware of the fact that the English accents people have is relevant since that reflects part of their identity and their cultural background, and as Crystal (2017) stated, imitating natives only bereaves our culture, our personality, and who we really are. With this, it is not implied that linguistics is not important; it is indeed, but as long as variation does not get in the way of intelligibility, it is also correct, valuable, and proper. Thus, everyone should know and explain to people that students may not get that “native-like” level, but a good proficiency in communication, using the language in real contexts.

Moreover, any discrimination should not be upon students because of accent or the misconceptions mentioned below, as educators, we are in charge of motivating our students, equip them to succeed, and to think critically. However, some of the implications these topics may have are the imposition and pressure students and teachers have to achieve this level and pronunciation according to different native speakerism’s views.

All in all, native speakerism is an issue that affects us all and that blinds us from the main goal when learning another language. While it is true that English is now essential to have better opportunities, we need to make sure these opportunities are open to everyone equally regardless of their nationality or accent. Educating people as well as opening spaces to talk about these problems can have a huge positive impact on how English learning is perceived, not to mention that we will be building more self-confident students.

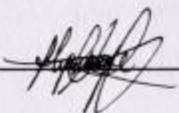
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DECLARACIÓN JURADA

Yo, Stephanie Yesenia Solis Sequeira, cédula de identidad 115730467, estudiante de la Universidad Nacional, declaro bajo fe de juramento y consciente de la responsabilidades penales de este acto, que soy autor intelectual del Trabajo Final de Graduación Titulado "**The Myth of Native Speakers and Native Speakerism in Costa Rica**", para optar por el grado de Maestría en Educación con énfasis en el Aprendizaje del Inglés.



Firma

Heredia, a los 09 días del mes de Septiembre del año 2021.

Refrendo

Los abajo firmantes avalamos el Trabajo de Graduación de la estudiante Stephanie Solís Sequeira, cédula 1 1573 0467, que lleva como título **The Myth of Native Speakers and Native Speakerism in Costa Rica**, dado que cumple con las disposiciones vigentes y la calidad académica requerida por el posgrado.

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