

POINT TO POINT

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NATIVES, SPEAKERS, AND MODELS

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Abstract

The use in ELT of the terms "native speaker" and "non-native speaker" needs to be rethought. The author argues that the model for learners is the native teacher communicating in the target language. The role of the foreign teacher is to support that model in classroom interaction.

In August 1987, I was fortunate enough to be invited to Tokyo by the British Council to teach on two seminars for Japanese teachers of English in Junior and Senior High Schools. Three things have been on my mind since I left. First, I was very impressed by the enthusiasm and ability of the teachers I worked with. Second, I was a little unsettled by some aspects of a *native speaker/non-native speaker* distinction that I came across. Third, I thought that the short *JALT Journal* article by Nakayama (1987) reviewing Smith's (e.g. 1983) philosophy of English as an International Language was a very useful contribution to our thinking when we try to balance the potential contributions to language teaching of the native teacher in any country and the (usually foreign) native speaker

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of the language being taught. In this short article, I also hope to make a small contribution to the same topic. As my acquaintance with Japan has been so brief, I shall draw on my own experience elsewhere and leave readers to make their own decisions about the relevance of what I have to say to their own situations.

As Paikeday (1985) points out, the term *native speaker* is frequently used but seldom defined. One relatively uncontroversial definition might be based on the accident of birth and growing up; that is to say that a person is a native speaker of the language that he or she learnt first as a mother tongue. In fact, this is already problematical, because although many of us grow up in monolingual societies, most of us do not. Furthermore, many children learn first a language that is the mother tongue of only one, or of neither of their parents, but let us leave that aside.

There is another usage of *native speaker* which is often confused with this first sense. This is the usage common in linguistics meaning something like: "*someone gifted with special and often infallible grammatical insights*" (Paikeday, *ibid.*, p. 1). Paikeday's argument, which I would wish to support, is that this creature is in fact a type of linguistic unicorn, well known in the myths and legends but impossible to relate systematically to a group of living beings. This *native speaker* is one of a set of idealised abstractions, along with the *homogenous speech community* and *formal syntactic competence* which are found necessary by some theoretical linguists. There is no reason for us to suppose that we can select people according to an accident of birth and thereafter rely on their grammatical insights. Conversely, there is no reason not to trust the grammatical insights of someone who has reached an appropriate level of ability in a language, whatever the accident of their birth. Let us, then, restrict the definition of *native speaker* to its *accident of birth* sense and look further at how the term is used in language teaching.

In a country where a language does not play an established social role, it is often said that a *native speaker model* is needed. The argument is that as there is no established local variety of the language, a standard model should be used in order to increase the likelihood of international intelligibility. A further refinement is to accept that although the *model* will be that of a native speaker, the target which the local learners will actually be asked to achieve may well deviate from this model.

There seems to be some logic in this in a linguistic sense, but there is again a danger of a linguistic abstraction being confused with actual people. When I stood in front of a class of Turkish schoolchildren, there was clearly only a very restricted sense in which I could act as a model for them in social, cultural, emotional, or experiential terms, with regard either to their past or their future. The person who could act as such a model would be a Turkish teacher; and, if we believe that reference to the social, cultural, and emotional experiences, awareness, and aspirations of our pupils is important in learning, then this is the ideal model.

As far as the linguistic model is concerned, there are two points to consider. First, following the argument about learning models above, the best model for the students is not a foreigner speaking his or her native language, but the native teacher effectively communicating in a foreign language. Second, the role of the foreign native speaker in such a situation is to partner and support the native teacher in his or her communication. I should like to discuss these two points further.

Without going into detail about the various possible positions, I think that there is a consensus among language teachers at the moment that there are times to concentrate on encouraging fluency, and times to concentrate on encouraging accuracy. If we really believe that, it needs to be demonstrated in the way that native teachers view their own use of the foreign language. Students are not insensitive; if they see

that the teacher is embarrassed about making formal mistakes in the language, then they will very well understand that it is accuracy, above all else, that counts. Similarly, they will understand that fluent communication is valued if they see their teachers enjoy using the language, use whatever communication strategies come to hand, and are as accurate as they can – when they have time to concentrate on accuracy. For teachers of a language foreign to themselves, as for learners, there are times to concentrate on accuracy and times to concentrate on fluency. A teacher who is presenting an item of structure to a class needs to concentrate on being accurate; a teacher who is telling the class a story needs to concentrate on telling that story in an exciting and involving way.

The appropriate language model, then, is the native teacher enjoying the language and, wherever possible, being seen to use the language to communicate with foreigners. This makes enormous demands on the native teacher. One of the reasons why teaching is such an exhausting trade is that we repeatedly have to open ourselves up in front of large groups of people in the knowledge that we might be challenged, criticised, proved wrong, laughed at, talked about, disliked, or even despised. That applies to all teachers. The threat to personal security experienced by someone teaching “communicatively” a language which they themselves have learned at school must be many times greater.

This leads us to the question of an appropriate role for people involved in teaching their native language in someone else’s country. In their partnership with the native teacher, the essential element of that role is not to provide a model of correctness but to support the native teacher’s attempt to model communication with a foreigner. This is the relevance of Smith’s (1986, p. 32) comment cited by Nakayama:

. . . [N]ative speakers need as much help as non-natives when using English to interact internationally. There is no room for linguistic chauvinism. (1987, p. 159)

One hopes that anyone who has the education of school-children in their hands will have had appropriate training and be involved in their own development as teachers. As far as the teaching of English is concerned, it seems more and more important that this training and development should help us escape from the essentially nationalistic world-view of *native speaker/non-native speaker* and get us involved in furthering an internationalist perspective in which users of English are simply more or less accomplished communicators.

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