

ELT: the native speaker's burden?

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The article analyses samples of the promotion of the native speaker and British ELT expertise. It shows how unscientific and inappropriate such arguments are, and considers what minimal qualifications a language teacher should possess.¹

Inflated claims and a questionable assumption

The current boom in the demand for English has been accompanied by inflated claims for what the *language* can do and for what the *language teaching profession* can do.

The assumption underlying such claims seems to be that more English or more ELT can only be for the good of the learners in question. But this is highly questionable as a general principle in educational language planning. It is a dubious assumption in relation to many specific issues, such as the current vogue in continental Europe to start foreign languages earlier in the primary school; or English being projected as a panacea for the ills of Eastern Europe (according to Douglas Hurd in the spring of 1990, it is British Government policy to replace Russian by English as the first foreign language throughout Eastern and Central Europe); or the continued dominant role of English in southern countries which are in educational and social crisis (Mateene, 1985; Ngugi, 1986; Hawes and Coombe, 1986).

When claims for English or ELT are put forward, the appropriate response would be to ask: 'What scientific evidence is there for them?' Analysis of such arguments, of who uses them and why, can illuminate the factors that determine decisions to promote a particular pedagogical approach, or one language rather than another, and the major social implications that such decisions entail. Analysis needs to place the arguments in their historical context if light is to be shed on the force of the arguments and their truth value. As Ansre has shown (1979) in relation to the advocacy of English in West Africa, the arguments may be false, or irrelevant to the planning of basic education, or both.

Inflated claims about English

Inflated claims about *the English language* can be analysed as relating to three supposed attributes of the language. The arguments refer to the *intrinsic* nature of a language (e.g. English as 'well adapted for development and change', Strevens 1980: 85; English as 'tied to no particular social, political, economic or religious system, nor to a specific racial or cultural group', Wardhaugh 1987: 15); but these are matters which few linguists take seriously these days. Or they refer to the *extrinsic*

resources associated with a language (e.g. availability of teaching materials or trained teachers); but these are arguments which tend to ignore the structural power which accounts for the privileged position of some languages. Or they refer to the *uses* to which a language may be put (English as leading to technological advance, prosperity, or national unity); but these are arguments which are in the nature of a promise, and which may turn out to be as unredeemable in Uganda or Nigeria as in Northern Ireland. Such special pleading for English has been analysed in depth elsewhere (Phillipson, 1990; and Phillipson, forthcoming), and will not be pursued further here.

**Arguments used
in marketing ELT**

This article will concentrate on claims of the second type: that is arguments used in marketing ELT, of which the following two are not untypical samples. The first comes from a policy statement on foreign language teaching in Europe after 1992, the second from an article on standard English published in *English Today*, and first delivered as a paper to the Japanese Association of Language Teachers.

The native speaker should become the standard foreign-language teacher within the countries of the European Community. They know best what is important in the language teaching of tomorrow: the active and creative language use in everyday communication. (Freudenstein, 1991)

. . . the latest ideas in English teaching. Where best, after all, to get the latest ideas on this than in the leading English-speaking countries? (Quirk, 1990)

The progenitors of such arguments are eminent scholars who are well-placed to influence the reshaping of the European and global linguistic maps.² Indeed, the notion that the ideal teacher is a native speaker of the language is a cornerstone of a monolingual pedagogy, this being 'the hallmark which set ELT apart from foreign language teaching in Britain' (Howatt, 1984: 212). The British variant of ELT evolved in two main seedbeds, the adult education field (in which Palmer, Hornby, *et al.* worked), and colonial education systems, which in secondary and higher education attempted to reproduce globally the teaching of English as a mother tongue in the metropolis (Perren, 1963). These strands came together when applied linguistics and ELT were actively expanded from the end of the 1950s, as a result of the British Government appreciating the connection between the promotion of English as a worldwide second language and the maintenance of British influence in the post-colonial era. American ESL started off by being contrastively orientated, but, under the influence of structuralism in linguistics and behaviourism in psychology, became almost equally monolingual in approach (the exception being the bilingual education programmes for particular minority group children).

**The native-
speaker ideal**

The native-speaker ideal dates from a time when language teaching was indistinguishable from culture teaching. All learners of English were assumed to be familiarizing themselves with the culture(s) that English

originated from, for contact of some form with the culture(s). The ideal also predates tape-recordings, video, and other technical resources which now permit learners to be exposed to a wide range of native-speaker models as well as second language users of English. It equally predates any realization of the consequences of what Kachru (1986) refers to as 'nativization', the process by which English has indigenized in different parts of the world, and developed distinct local forms determined by local norms. In such countries, there may be controversy about norms, but the native-speaker norm has already been superseded by events, at least outside the classroom. (Nativization should not be confused with the native-speaker concept, and is invariably associated with bilingualism or multilingualism).

In linguistics, the problematical theoretical status of the native-speaker concept is appreciated (Coulmas, 1981). In sociolinguistics, the native speaker has been unmasked, and proposals made for displacing him or her (Rampton, 1990). In ELT, the native speaker has been sent worldwide to teach, train teachers, and advise. In the other direction, key language people have been funded by such bodies as The British Council and the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) to imbibe ELT at source. Official British conviction has been that 'University departments of applied linguistics in Britain lead the world in the research and practice of the teaching of language, and especially English as both a foreign and second language' (ODA, 1990: 12), an ethnocentric claim which is cast in the same mould as those of Freudenstein and Quirk. It is intriguing to speculate on what evidence, scientific or otherwise, there might be for such a claim. Or are we to assume that it is merely academic jingoism, for the eyes of politicians and bureaucrats only?

Why should the native speaker be intrinsically better qualified than the non-native? This is presumably felt to be the case because of greater facility in demonstrating fluent, idiomatically appropriate language (the factor that Freudenstein highlights), in appreciating the cultural connotations of the language, and in assessing whether a given language form is acceptably correct or not.

None of these virtues is impervious to teacher training. Nor is any of them something that well trained non-natives cannot acquire. Teachers, whatever popular adages say, are made rather than born, many of them doubtless self-made, whether they are natives or non-natives. The insight that teachers have into language learning processes, and into the structure and usage of a language, and their capacity to analyse and explain language, definitely have to be learnt—which is not the same as saying that they have to be taught, though hopefully teaching can facilitate and foster these qualities.

The untrained or unqualified native speaker is in fact potentially a menace because of ignorance of the structure of the mother tongue, a point that Quirk makes convincingly in the article quoted above. There are indeed strong grounds for concern about the deficient metalinguistic awareness of any under-trained native speaker: many of the products of the British

education system recruited into ELT apparently do not know much about their language (see the letter from an experienced ELT appointments officer in the *Guardian Weekly*, 23 July 1989). Nor is there anything new about awareness of the limitations of the native speaker: 'A teacher is not adequately qualified to teach a language merely because it is his mother tongue', warns the UNESCO monograph on the use of the vernacular languages in education (UNESCO, 1953: 69).

But all this has not deterred the Anglo-American ELT world from operating with native-speaker-teacher competence as the ideal. This has occurred even though some influential ELT writers were aware of the nativization process in places to which the ideal had been transplanted, and suggested alternative norms for learners. A paper on 'Language and Communication in the Commonwealth', prepared for the third Commonwealth Education Conference (Ottawa, Canada, 1964) notes that in the African context 'English must be seen as an African language—albeit an acquired one—and must be ready to serve as the vehicle for distinctively African cultural values' (Perren and Holloway, 1965: 20). Also in 1964, Halliday, McIntosh, and Strevens suggested a new realism in norms, when they described the emergence of 'educated West African English' and 'Indian English', labels which refer to a great number of varieties of English. They suggested that these could serve as acceptable local models, provided international intelligibility was maintained (1964: 296). This proposal to abandon a single, global norm was dubbed the 'British heresy in TESOL' by Prator (1968), whose arguments were unmasked as being ethnocentric and unscientific by Kachru (1976, republished in Kachru, 1986).

The native-speaker-teacher ideal has remained as a central part of the conventional wisdom of the ELT profession. As with many hegemonic practices, there has been a tendency to accept it without question. The ideal can be seen in operation implicitly in the practices of the main ELT publishers, which for obvious reasons seek to market their products globally. The ideal can be seen explicitly in the reports of seminal conferences which nursed ELT into institutional existence and gave legitimation to a particular educational paradigm—for instance, the Makerere Conference on the Teaching of English as a Second Language, 1961, the key conference for 'Third World' ESL countries.

Are non-native speakers better qualified?

In the European foreign language teaching tradition (teachers of French in Britain, of English in Scandinavia, etc.), which is highly successful in promoting some kinds of language learning, the ideal teacher has near-native-speaker proficiency in the foreign language, and comes from the same linguistic and cultural background as the learners. It is arguable, as a general principle, that non-native teachers may, in fact, be better qualified than native speakers, if they have gone through the complex process of acquiring English as a second or foreign language, have insight into the linguistic and cultural needs of their learners, a detailed awareness of how mother tongue and target language differ and what is difficult for learners, and first-hand experience of using a second or foreign language.

If this is so, it would seem to be a minimal requirement of teachers of English as a second or foreign language that they should have proven experience of and success in learning and using a second/foreign language themselves, and that they should have profound familiarity with the language and culture of the learners they are responsible for. Clearly, such teachers may or may not have English as their mother tongue.

Or is it enough if the ELT teacher, in addition to ideally being a native speaker (Freudenstein), has been through the best of British training (Quirk)? Quirk's claim seems to be that in places where English is used as a mother tongue there is the best expertise in the learning of English as a second or foreign language.

No one would dispute that there is considerable sophistication in British applied linguistics and ELT, in academic institutions in the public and private sectors, and in publishing houses, or that the scientific community worldwide should be familiar with this expertise. However, applied linguistics and English teaching circles in many other countries may have much more appropriate expertise for meeting the language learning needs of their country. British personnel may not fulfil the minimal requirements for a language teacher in such contexts. What is offensive in Quirk's argument is the apparent implication that there is less sophistication elsewhere, that Anglo-American monolingually-oriented experts are necessarily better qualified than their counterparts in countries where English is successfully learned as a second or foreign language.

One might posit as a general principle that scholars who regularly follow the scientific literature in several languages are in a better position than those who are limited to one; and it is interesting to speculate on what implications this might have for the anglophonic world.

A dubious export What is also highly dubious is how far British or American expertise is exportable to contexts with different cultural, linguistic, and pedagogic universes. Implementing educational innovation is an immensely complex undertaking, which presupposes control of a substantial number of variables. Monitoring educational change validly is an intrinsically difficult task. We are therefore frequently obliged to resort to more informal assessments. Among these there is abundant evidence of ELT not delivering the goods (see some of the critical papers from this journal collected in Rossner and Bolitho, 1990). A recent example is Prodromou (1988), who wonders why 'a particular piece of "authentic" material may fall flat in the classroom; why the functional syllabus does not always function, why communicative methodology does not produce much communication, why Council of Europe Needs Analysis has not met the Greek learners' needs'. He concludes that the teaching material, ideological messages, and pedagogy, which are part of a globally-marketed ELT, are culturally inappropriate.

The grave implications of this are drawn out pointedly by a scholar who is generally extremely sober and generous in his views. Writing not of Greece, but of Third World countries, Kachru says:

The role of English in the sociolinguistic context of each English-using Third World country is not properly understood, or is conveniently ignored. The consequences of this attitude are that the Third World countries are slowly realizing that, given the present attitude of TESL specialists, it is difficult to expect from such specialists any theoretical insights and professional leadership in this field which would be contextually, attitudinally, and pragmatically useful to the Third World countries. (Kachru, 1986: 101)

Conclusion Hopefully, those who are assessing the merits of claims about English or ELT are in a position to see through them when they are manifestly false. This may, however, be an unrealistic expectation when such claims are presented by 'experts' who represent a prestigious language or a dominant pedagogical paradigm. Such arguments, their role and functions, therefore raise serious ethical and professional issues. To pursue the analysis of such claims in more depth requires elaboration of a more substantial theoretical framework and more detailed study of specific instances of how arguments have influenced policy. There is a clear need for more study of the senses and contexts in which ELT can be considered the 'native speaker's burden' and what consequences follow for present and future policy.

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Notes

- 1 I should like to thank Tove Skutnabb-Kangas for her non-native but informed comments on the first draft of this paper. Much of the argument of the paper is elaborated in more depth in Phillipson (forthcoming).
- 2 Freudenstein directs an information centre on foreign language teaching. He is secretary of the worldwide Fédération Internationale des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes (FIPLV), for which he edits a journal which is subsidized by UNESCO. Quirk is an influential grammarian, who has taken upon himself the role of guardian of the standard English language globally (Quirk, 1990). See also the preface to the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1987), in which Quirk makes strong and eminently disputable statements about the role of various types of dictionary in foreign language learning.

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