

Experiences and perceptions of non-native-speaker teacher trainees on a TESOL programme in New Zealand

Sue Edwards, Waikato Institute of Technology, Hamilton, New Zealand

Abstract

This paper reports research which focussed on a group of non-native speakers of English who had completed an entry-level TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) qualification in a tertiary institution in New Zealand. The non-native teacher trainees were asked to describe their experiences of participating in the programme, which included both native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) trainees. They were asked to rate the difficulty of programme requirements and suggest improvements, describe any difficulties they had encountered on the programme and how they overcame those difficulties, and describe any advantages or disadvantages which they perceived of being a non-native speaker of English on the programme. They were also asked to comment on their interactions with NS trainees, as well as any comparisons they may have made between themselves and the NS trainees. The research has applications for those who train NNS English language teachers, and who wish to understand more about NNS trainee teachers' experiences and perceptions, with a view to improving such programmes for NNS trainees.

Introduction

The increase in the number and diversity of non-native English speaking teachers of English (NNESTs) is a phenomenon that those involved in English language teaching (ELT) around the globe are aware of. It has been estimated that the proportion of non-native-speaker teachers of English world-wide is more than 80% (Canagarajah, 1999). In the last decade there has also been an increase in the number of non-native speakers of English (NNS) entering teacher training programmes in English speaking countries.

Regardless of this reality, there has been a long-held general assumption that a native speaker (NS) of a language is the best person to teach that language. This assumption began to be questioned some time ago, and the term 'the native speaker fallacy' (Phillipson, 1992, cited in Canagarajah, 1999) was coined - the fallacy that the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker. However, the fact that the 'native speaker preferred' phenomenon continues to this day is demonstrated by a quick search of many web sites advertising ESL employment. For example, on one day in October, 2007, on one such web site, a random selection of ESL positions available in five different countries (Kuwait, Turkey, Japan, China, Czech Republic) all included the requirement or preference for a native speaker of English (Sperling, 2007).

Reasons for the research

The initial impetus for the current study was an increase in the number of NNSs entering a TESOL programme at a tertiary institution in New Zealand. In 2003 the number of NNS trainees was quite low, less than 10%. Since 2003, the proportion of NNS trainees in the programme has grown each year. In 2007 about one third of the teacher trainees overall were NNSs, although in one intake, the proportion was 54%. This is similar to data reported from other English speaking countries, for example, the United States, where Llurda (2005) and Moussu (2006) reported respectively that 36% and 40% of teacher trainees were NNSs. The figures for Australia and New Zealand in recent years are not known. With such a high proportion of NNSs entering TESOL programmes, it seems very timely that those who administer and teach these programmes try to gather information about the experience of these trainees, in order to better understand what factors may contribute to success on the programmes.

Another reason for doing the research was the fact that there seemed to be anecdotal evidence of non-native speaker trainees' concerns about the fact that they may not be well equipped to become English language teachers because they are not native speakers of English. For example, the following comment was posted on one of the 'Moodle' (online learning) web sites for the programme in the study:

“Half students in our class are non-native speakers. Many of us including me want to be an English teacher. However, as non-English native speakers, are we able to become a good English teacher here? What are the advantages and disadvantages of it? What should we do to achieve this goal?”

Native and non-native speakers in ELT

Previous work in this area has claimed that NNESTs have suffered from both an inferiority complex and schizophrenia (Medgyes, 1994). Some NNESTs have an inferiority complex because they “are in constant distress as [they] realize how little [they] know about the language [they] are supposed to teach” (Medgyes, 1994, p. 38). Others may suffer from schizophrenia if they “behave in the classroom like plasticine Brits or Americans” (Medgyes, p. 37). According to Canagarajah (1999), another form of schizophrenia occurs when NNESTs working in their home countries “profess Centre [Western] pedagogical fashions, but practise local/traditional approaches in the classroom. They may believe that English should be the sole medium of instruction, but practise considerable code-switching themselves in the classroom” (p. 87).

Medgyes (1994, 1999) asserted that NNESTs have many unique strengths, which they need to be aware of: they can and do provide a good learner model for their students, as they have learned the language and attained a high level of proficiency in it; they can teach language strategies more effectively, as they have developed their own language learning strategies; they are able to supply learners with more information about the English language to their students than a native speaker might be able to provide; they can anticipate and prevent language difficulties of their students better, as they have encountered these difficulties themselves; they are able to be more empathetic to the needs and problems of learners; and they can use students' L1 to their advantage, if they

know it. The source of these strengths can be summed up by the statement that “Native speakers know the destination, but not the terrain that has to be crossed to get there; they themselves have not travelled the same route.” (Seidlhofer, 1999, cited in Moussu, 2006) Indeed, the strengths of non-native-speaker English teachers have come to be more widely acknowledged. However, there is still some ambivalence around the issue, and a study by Tang (1997) showed that a high percentage of NNS teachers believed that NS teachers were superior in all language skills areas: speaking (100%), pronunciation (92%), listening (87%), vocabulary (79%), and reading (72%).

Aims of the research

The overall aims of the current research were to find out more about NNS trainees’ experiences on the TESOL programme, in order to determine whether their experience was largely a positive or negative one, and to gain an understanding of the trainees’ perceptions of themselves as English language teacher trainees as they participated in the teacher training programme. The specific areas of the research which are reported in this paper are the trainees’ ratings of programme requirements, the areas of difficulty on the programme for the trainees and how they overcame these difficulties, whether the trainees thought there were any advantages or disadvantages of being a NNS on the programme, their interaction with NS trainees on the programme, and their comparisons of themselves with NS trainees on the programme. A further paper will report on other aspects of the research, which investigated the NNS trainees’ perceptions of their own language skills, their teaching knowledge and skills, their own teaching knowledge and skills compared to NS teachers, and their perceptions of NS and NNS teachers in general.

Methodology

The programme in the current study was an introductory level TESOL, at levels 5 and 6 in the New Zealand National Qualifications Framework (equivalent to first and second year undergraduate university level). The programme was 12 or 15 weeks in length, and accepted students with and without a tertiary degree, and those who were native and non-native speakers of English. An interview and selection task was required of all students, except those who already held a trained teacher’s qualification. Non-native English speakers were required to have gained an academic IELTS score of 6 or equivalent.

The participants comprised 15 out of a possible 22 NNS trainees who had completed the TESOL programme in the 18 months previous to the start of the study (June 2006 – July 2007). The participants spoke nine different first languages (L1) – Chinese, Indonesian, Korean, Hindi, Gujarati, Dutch, Somali, Russian, and Afrikaans.

Of the 15 participants, 11 had previously obtained a degree qualification, with three of these holding a Postgraduate or Master’s degree. Two had degrees in ELT, and one in Linguistics. 12 participants stated they had had previous teaching experience, with eight of these having taught English language. Of these, all eight had used English as the medium of instruction, and four had also worked as bilingual teachers, using English and another language in the classroom.

A questionnaire was used in the research to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. (See appendix).

Perceptions of Programme requirements (Quantitative data)

Participants were asked to rate 10 key programme requirements according to how easy or difficult they found them to be. As the table below (Fig.1) shows, “Communicating with the programme tutors” was rated the easiest, and “Completing the written assignments” was rated the most difficult programme requirement. It is interesting to note that while this was rated the most difficult, “understanding the requirements of the written assignment” was rated 5th. Overall, there was not a large range in the ratings given – the easiest programme requirement was rated 4.7 and the most difficult was rated 3.6, on a scale from 0 to 6. It appears that the participants felt that overall they were coping well with the programme requirements.

Figure1: Trainees’ ratings of the difficulty of 10 programme requirements
(0=very difficult; 6=very easy)

Programme requirements	Mean rating
Communicating with the programme tutors	4.73
Using the resources and services offered by the institution (e.g. enrolment, library, computers, study skills assistance)	4.6
Communicating with the other bilingual, non-native English speaker teacher trainees in my class group	4.53
Communicating with native English speaker teacher trainees in my class group.	4.46
Understanding the requirements of the written assignments	4.33
Preparing teaching resources for ESOL lessons	4.06
Reading and understanding the content of course readings	4
Writing lesson plans for ESOL learners	3.93
Communicating with ESOL learners in the teaching practicum classes	3.86
Completing (writing) the written assignments	3.6

Difficulties on the programme and strategies for overcoming difficulties (Qualitative)

Participants were asked to describe any three difficulties that they had experienced on the programme. The most commonly mentioned difficulty was completing the written assignments, which was mentioned by eight of the 15 participants. This confirms what they had reported as the most difficult programme requirement in the previous question.

Other difficulties mentioned were writing lesson plans, communicating with others (including their classmates and ESOL learners), and reading and understanding the course readings. These were also rated as being more difficult in the previous question.

Eleven of the 15 participants were able to give three strategies for dealing with difficulties. Asking classmates for assistance was the most commonly mentioned strategy, by seven of the 15 participants. Doing more reading or research was the second main strategy used, mentioned by five participants. There were also various other strategies given. Some of these were very practical, while others were more abstract, such as in the following comment:

I overcome this difficulty by thinking of the flexibility aspects, by thinking positive and a belief that this is a learning experience. I could have all the excuses to slack, but I overcame this by telling myself: stick to my goal, don't complain, but do something. It worked.

Improvements to the programme (Qualitative data)

When asked to suggest up to three improvements to the programme, there were only three suggestions given for improvements geared specifically towards NNS trainees: “arrange an interview with a good non-native speaker teacher for NNS trainees”; “make all NNS trainees in one group for teaching practicum”; “encourage trainees to form study groups that include both native and non-native speakers”. Other suggestions to the programme seemed to be of a general nature, not relating to either native or non-native speaker trainees’ concerns, although one participant suggested that the NS trainees needed more grammar training. However, the reasons given for these ‘general’ improvements included perceived NNS concerns. For example, ‘one-to-one tutorials’ was a suggested improvement, and the reason given for this was so that “NESB trainees can have the opportunities to clarify the course requirement”. Similarly, “Help with essay writing and proof reading” was suggested as an improvement, and the reason given for this was that “There was a strong need among non-native speakers for help with essay writing and proof reading”.

Advantages and disadvantages of being a NNS teacher trainee (Qualitative)

Participants were asked to provide up to three responses regarding their perceptions about the advantages and disadvantages of being a NNS on the programme. The two most frequent responses regarding perceived advantages were “Having previous English language learning experience”, which was given by nine participants, and “I have studied English grammar before” or “My knowledge of grammar is better than that of native speakers”, which was given by five participants.

Other advantages mentioned were related quite strongly to the first advantage of having had English language learning experience. They included the ideas that non-native speaker teacher trainees have: better understanding of the learner (three responses); more understanding of the learning process (three responses); awareness of more than one language and more than one culture (two responses). Participants also stated: “I can use my first language with learners of the same language background” (two responses) and “I have more experience in finding strategies to learn” (one response).

The most frequent area of perceived disadvantage for NNS teacher trainees was in regard to the appropriateness or accuracy of their pronunciation. Five participants mentioned “Non-native speaker accent” as a disadvantage, and three responses stated “Sometimes I couldn’t pronounce words correctly” or “incorrect pronunciation”.

Six of the 15 participants reported that the biggest disadvantage of being a NNS on the programme was that “Reading and writing assignments take longer than for NS” or “My reading and writing skills are not good enough”. This confirms their rating of the most difficult programme requirement as “completing the written assignments”.

Other disadvantages mentioned were: “Not good at everyday spoken English”/“incorrect oral grammar” (three responses); “I can’t always catch the meaning of what is said/ “not sure about some colloquial expressions and jokes” (three responses); “Writing/speaking while thinking in another language” (two responses); “Lack of NZ teaching experience”/“not familiar with NZ curriculum” (two responses); “not enough confidence in teaching another language” (one response); “sometimes people are biased against non-native speakers of English” (one response); “Cultural differences in the approach to learning” (one response).

Interaction with NS trainees (Qualitative data)

Part of the purpose of the research was to find out about the NNS trainees’ interaction with NS on the programme, and participants were asked to comment on their personal relationships and study relationships with native-speaker teacher trainees on the programme. Eleven participants stated that they had very good, good or positive personal relationships with NS trainees, while two reported “Only a professional relationship” or “not much personal relationship”. In regard to study relationships, nine participants reported that they worked often with NS trainees, with three working only ‘sometimes’ with NS trainees, and only one participant stating that they worked mainly with NS trainees.

Comparisons with NS trainees (Qualitative)

Finally, the NNS trainees were asked about whether they compared themselves to the NS trainees on the programme and what their thoughts were about this. In response to this question, 10 of the 15 reported that they did compare themselves to the NS trainees on the programme, but there was a range of responses as to what their thoughts were. These responses could be categorized according to the apparent perceptions of the trainees regarding the relative status of native speaker and non-native speaker trainees on the programme:

- **Balanced** (included examples of strengths and weaknesses of NSs and NNSs – three responses). For example:
“When I looked at other native speaker teachers on the programme they seem to have not many difficulties in producing language such as speaking and writing. However, I was good at identifying learners’ difficulties and grammar because of previous learning experience.”

- **Neutral** (remarked on the differences but gave no overall evaluation of either NSs or NNSs– three responses). For example:
“During discussions there were times when I found my point of view was very different to that of native speakers of English.”
- **Positive** (Viewed themselves more positively than NSs – one response):
“I’d like to know what the difference between us is. I thought if I can speak fluency English I can be a better teacher than some of the native speaker teacher trainees. I knew grammar. I understand how to learn English better. I clever than some of the native teacher trainees.”
- **Negative** (viewed themselves more negatively than NSs – one response)
“I sometimes felt that native speaker teacher trainees were better than me, especially in discussing time. I always felt that I didn’t give much contribution to the group.”
- **Learning** (tried to learn from NS trainees – one response):
“I watched how they explained a topic/subject, how they handled certain situations. I watched and listened for pronunciation, and behaviour in class. I compared their resources with mine and generally tried to learn from them.”
- **Want to know more about the differences** (one response):
“I want to know what are my advantages in learning this programme, and what are theirs (the natives). Then, we could help each other and make the learning process easier.”

Relating the findings to previous research about NNS TESOL trainees

Most studies with NNSs working in the field of TESOL have investigated the perceptions of practising teachers, but there have been some findings regarding NNS trainees. Medgyes (1999) argued that “...for NNS English teachers to be effective, self-confident, and satisfied professionals, first, we have to be near-native speakers of English” (p. 179), and asserted that “language training in preservice education should be a matter of paramount importance” (p. 179). This recommendation seems to fit well with the results obtained so far from this study, in which the participants have indicated that pronunciation and writing are areas of concern for them.

Llurda (2005) found that most NNS teacher trainees had higher language awareness than NS trainees. Although this study did not test this idea, NNS trainees reported that knowledge of English grammar was an advantage for them.

In a study by Samimy and Brutt-Gifler (1999), NNS TESOL students did not necessarily think that NS teachers were superior to NNS – 58% said that both are successful in ESL teaching, 24% said non-natives, and 12% natives. In the current study, only one participant rated NS trainees more highly than NNS – the others were spread among those who had a balanced or neutral view, or wanted to learn more about the differences.

Two recommendations which appeared in previous studies but which were not mentioned by participants in the current study were that TESOL teacher training integrate instruction on issues related to NNS across the whole teacher training curriculum (Kamhi-Stein, 2004), and TESOL programmes should teach the value of collaboration between NS and NNS teachers (Matsuda & Matsuda, 2004). Both of these would benefit both NS and NNS trainees on TESOL programmes.

Summary and Conclusions

The findings reported above point to two main areas of concern for the non-native teacher trainees: their ability to complete the written assignments in the programme, and their speaking skills, including pronunciation as well as ability to communicate with others on the programme and with ESOL learners. However, it seems that NNS trainees have strategies for dealing with difficulties. It is also clear that the NNS trainees are aware of their strengths, the key ones being that they have learned English themselves, and that they have learned about English grammar. The NNS and NS on the programme seemed to work co-operatively, according to the responses given, and the majority of NNS trainees compared themselves favourably to NS trainees, with only one rating him/herself negatively.

The findings of this study seem to point to some clear conclusions. Firstly, it seems that the experience of the participants on the programme was generally positive in that their ratings of the difficulty of the programme requirements indicated that they did not find any of the key programme requirements very difficult. They also reported positive and co-operative relationships with NS trainees.

Secondly, regarding their perception of themselves as teacher trainees, it seems that the NNS trainees have a fairly high level of confidence in themselves as English language teachers, as seen by the fact that they had a clear awareness of their strengths as about-to-be NNS teachers of English (having learned the language, and having previously learned about the grammar of English), and they had strategies to overcome difficulties which they had experienced on the programme. In addition, all but one of the ten participants who responded to this question rated him/herself positively or in a neutral way in relation to NS trainees on the programme.

Limitations of the study

There are several factors which may limit the usefulness or applicability of the results of the study. As this is a relatively small sample (15 participants) of NNS teacher trainees, participating in a particular teacher-training programme, it is difficult to know whether the findings are generalizable to the wider group of NNS teacher trainees. As the world of English language teaching is now dominated by NNS teachers, it would be useful to conduct similar research with larger samples of TESOL teacher trainees, both in 'ESL' and 'EFL' settings, to see whether experiences and perceptions differ to those reported in this study.

It is also difficult to assess to what extent the characteristics of the participants are typical of the broader group of NNS who undertake TESOL teacher training. For example, this sample included a relatively high number of participants with previous degree-level qualifications, and this may or may not be typical of NNS TESOL teacher trainees in general. Another factor which is inherent in all research which includes self-selected participants, as was the case with this study, is that those with a more positive experience may be the ones who opt into the research. This in itself may have biased the findings, which seem to point to a fairly positive overall experience on the programme.

In addition, it is not known if or how the experience of participating in the programme may have contributed to the participants' perceptions of advantages and disadvantages of being a NNS, and also their comparisons of themselves in relation to NS trainee teachers. It would have been useful to have conducted a pre-course questionnaire, which would have allowed the research to assess to some extent the effects of the programme itself on these factors.

Finally, the research methodology also limits the findings, in that it included only questionnaire responses. It would be useful to have also conducted interviews with the participants, particularly to find out more about the reasons for the ratings which they gave to the questionnaire items.

Future directions

The results of the study point to the desirability of following up on two areas of trainees' perceived needs for assistance: their ability to complete written academic assignments and their speaking skills. Participants on tertiary level programmes, whether NSs or NNSs, are known to need assistance with writing assignments, as shown by the inclusion in many undergraduate degrees of an academic writing paper, and of academic writing support departments in most tertiary institutions. In other words, addressing this area of concern would undoubtedly assist some of the NS trainees as well. To focus on the other area of concern for participants, their speaking skills, would require an analysis of individual difficulties, to ascertain whether aspects of pronunciation, vocabulary, functional language or grammatical structures were of most concern. To do so would go some way to addressing concerns of previous writers, who found that teacher training programmes offered very little, if any, opportunities for NNSs to develop their English language skills (Liu, J., 1999; Medgyes, 1999), and that many western-based TESOL programmes have not adequately recognized and addressed the different needs of NNS teacher trainees (Carrier, 2003). These findings suggest that it is timely that as teacher trainers we begin to address NNS trainee concerns, and also acknowledge and draw more on the strengths of NNS students in our TESOL programmes.

Final Word

As part of the trialling of the questionnaire used in the research, the questionnaire was sent to a NNEST colleague, to ask if she would comment on the appropriateness and wording of the questions. Her response was as follows: *"The questions are very interesting and thorough and I think I would love to answer them if I was your student*

(something about feeling valued, belonging to a cohort of “non-native speaker teachers”, etc).” This quote seems to reinforce the need to acknowledge the knowledge, experience and perceptions of the NNS trainees who are participating in TESOL programmes in Western countries.

REFERENCES

Canagarajah, A.S. (1999). Interrogating the ‘native speaker fallacy’: Non-linguistic roots, non-pedagogical results. In G. Braine (Ed.), *Non-native educators in English language teaching*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Carrier, K.A. (2003). NNS teacher trainees in Western-based TESOL programmes. *ELT Journal*, 57(3), 242-250.

Kamhi-Stein, L.D. (1999). Preparing non-native professionals in TESOL: Implications for teacher education programmes. In G. Braine (Ed.), *Non-native educators in English language teaching*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Liu, J. (1999). From their own perspectives: The impact on non-native professionals on their students. In G Braine (Ed.), *Non-native educators in English language teaching*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Llurda, E. (Ed). (2005). *Non-native language teachers: Perceptions, challenges and contributions to the profession*. New York: Springer.

Matsuda, A., & Matsuda, P. K. (2001). Autonomy and collaboration in teacher education: Journal sharing among native and non-native English-speaking teachers. *The CATESOL Journal*, 13(1), 109-121.

Medgyes, P. (1994). *The non-native teacher*. (1999) 2nd edition. Ismaning: Max Hueber Verlag.

Medgyes, P. (1999). Language training: A neglected area in teacher education. In G. Braine (Ed.), *Non-native educators in English language teaching*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Moussu, L. (2006). Native and non-native English-speaking English as a second language teachers: Student Attitudes, teacher self-perceptions, and intensive English administrator beliefs and practices. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis. Purdue University.

Samimy, K. & Brutt-Griffler (1999). To be a native or non-native speaker: Perceptions of “non-native” students in a graduate TESOL programme. In G. Braine (Ed.), *Non-native educators in English language teaching*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Sperling, D. (2007). *Dave’s ESL Café International Job Board*. Retrieved October 14, 2007, from <http://www.eslcafe.com/joblist/>

Tang, C. (1997). On the power and status of non-native ESL teachers. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(3), 557-583.

APPENDIX: Questionnaire

Q.1 Please circle a number from 0 to 6 for each of the following programme requirements, to indicate how easy or how difficult each was for you.

<i>Programme requirements</i>	Very difficult			Sometimes easy, sometimes difficult			Very easy
1. Communicating with native English speaker teacher trainees in my class group.	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. Communicating with the other non-native English speaker teacher trainees in my class group	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. Communicating with the programme tutors	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. Reading and understanding the content of course readings	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. Understanding the requirements of the written assignments	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. Completing (writing) the written assignments	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. Writing lesson plans for ESOL learners	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. Preparing teaching resources for ESOL lessons	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. Communicating with ESOL learners in the teaching practicum classes	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
10. Using the resources and services offered by the institution (e.g. enrolment, library, computers, study skills assistance)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6

Q.2 *Q2. Please list and briefly describe the three things that were the most difficult for you while you were studying on the programme, in order of difficulty for you. These may be things that you rated as 'very difficult' in question 4, or other things.*

Please also briefly describe what you did to overcome or try to overcome these difficulties.

a) Difficulty 1:

b) Difficulty 2:

c) Difficulty 3

Q.3 *Q3. Please list and briefly describe three things that you think could or should be done to improve the programme for non-native speaker teacher trainees, in order of importance.*

Please also give at least one reason for each improvement that you suggest.

a) Suggested improvement 1:

Reason/s for the improvement:

b) *Suggested improvement 2:*

Reason/s for the improvement:

c) *Suggested improvement 3:*

Reason/s for the improvement:

Q.4 *Q4. Please list and briefly explain three advantages that you can think of, of being a non-native speaker of English while you were studying on the programme.*

Advantage 1:

Advantage 2:

Advantage 3:

8 *Please list and briefly explain three disadvantages that you can think of, of being a non-native speaker of English while you were studying on the programme.*

Disadvantage 1:

Disadvantage 2:

Disadvantage

3:

Q.5 *Q5. Did you compare yourself to native speaker teacher trainees while on the programme?*

Yes No (tick one)

If you ticked 'Yes', please give some details about why you compared yourself to native speaker teacher trainees on the programme, and what your thoughts were.

If you ticked 'No', please explain why you didn't compare yourself to native speaker teacher trainees on the programme.

Q.6 *Q6. Please describe your personal or social relationships with other teacher trainees on the programme who were native speakers of English.*

Q.7 *Q7. Please describe your study relationships with other teacher trainees on the programme who were native speakers of English.*
