

The Native Speaker Myth and re-storying oneself within a disempowering discourse

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It was in high school that I started toying with the idea of pursuing teaching as a career. Having not known much about what I needed to pursue for this career path initially, I assumed my plan to earn a university degree in literature would be enough. When I found out that teacher's college was a necessity as well, I was somewhat surprised. I wondered, what about teacher's college would make me a teacher per se, was not simply knowing the subject matter that I would be teaching enough? This is a topic which I continue to ponder to this day: What makes a teacher? To be more precise, what makes a competent teacher? Is knowing the subject matter simply enough or is there something more?

As I started studying and teaching languages and literature, as a language teacher and student, I started to develop a criteria for *good* language teaching more clearly. Having earned a job teaching Serbian school simply based on the criteria of knowing the language, I quickly learned that this was not enough to qualify me to teach the language. I needed further understanding of the language itself as well as to understand that no language is a fixed system—it is always evolving and everchanging (Schleppegrell, 2018, p. 2). Having earned a Bachelors of English, I assumed I spent enough time studying the language, its ins and outs, and had a acquired enough of a knowledge base to teach it. However, I also found this theory of mine contradicted once I started teaching English myself. Not being a native English speaker myself, I experienced a lot of scrutiny from students and parents in my teaching practices. I was faced with the Native Speaker myth; this assumes that native speakers (NS) are inherently better teachers than non-native speakers (NNSs) (Johnson & Golombek, 2018, p. 31). I am not sure if I still have an answer as to what exactly makes a competent language teacher, but in this paper, it is my aim to explore this question more by looking into the criteria for becoming a language teacher as well as exploring whether NS of a language have an easier time in the teaching world and achieve greater success as their *nativeness* gives them an instant level of credibility. Finally, I will explore how the NS myth affects the pedagogy, teaching practice and day to day lessons of non-native teachers as well as whether the NS myth affects their confidence levels and make them question their competence as teachers? I plan to do so through examining my personal narrative as a NNSs as well as my experience teaching Serbian as a NS.



While in university, one of my first ever teaching jobs was teaching Serbian school classes at my church. Granted I was not yet a certified educator, I still thought this to be the perfect job for myself. Since I spoke the language, I wondered, what else could I really need to know? I assumed that simply by being a native speaker I would automatically be a better teacher than a non-native speaker. In retrospect, I find myself guilty of the native speaker myth. This is the assumption that NSs of a language are inherently better teachers than NNSs (Johnson & Golombek, 2018, p. 33). This myth continues to marginalize Non-Native speaking teachers and thus undermines their professionalism (Johnson & Golombek, 2018, p. 33). Very quickly I realized that simply knowing the language was not nearly enough to qualify me to teach Serbian. I found myself struggling in a lot of my planning of my language program. While yes, I knew the language (technically), I did not know nor understand the language as a living and breathing being. I did not know its history. I viewed the Serbian language as a fixed system as opposed to one that is always evolving and is ever-changing. In my mind, language (Serbian in this case) was a separate and isolated entity, which lived in its own lonely world, isolated from all other disciplines. Holding such a view, left my students bored and simply uninterested in learning this language. Very quickly I realized that I had to do something to intrigue my class and hook them into learning Serbian. My way of doing this was through the incorporation of Serbian history lessons into my language program. I integrated historical events and stories into lessons about grammar and reading in such way as to make my program relevant and interesting to students. It was at this point in my teacher education and my teaching career, that I started to wonder and wanted to define for myself what makes a *competent* language teacher, what precisely is the criteria for this title? While I am still developing and shaping this criteria until this day, one of the main components of my criteria of what exactly is a *competent educator* that I added during my time teaching Serbian school was education in language history and an understanding that each language is not a fixed entity but is always changing and evolving.

Once I started studying English, I decided that this would be the language I would focus this in-depth study on. English teachers need to be aware that the English language (like all languages) is not a fixed system, and it is always in a process of evolution. I feel that through my four years of studying English at the university level, I started to develop an understanding for this concept. English teachers need to adjust their teaching to reflect this. As speakers and writers, we draw on options in different ways, depending on what/or with whom we are interacting (Schleppegrell, 2018, p. 2). Language is often missing from teacher education programs. If teacher education programs can provide English teachers with a greater understanding about language itself and the way that students can be supported in language development, then these teachers will have a greater range of classroom strategies, but also they will be able to take on new leadership roles in working with subject area teachers (Schleppegrell, 2018, p. 2). Language teachers should develop a way of teaching English to students while also learning school subjects, a way of integrating



the two into one program. These educators need to be able to analyze a unit of study, to understand the tasks which students are expected to do, and to use this knowledge to support a focus on the language features which are relevant to the task and goal (Schleppegrell, 2018, p. 8). English language learners are usually expected to develop both English and subject area knowledge at a pace that allows them to have fully developed content knowledge in all subject areas learned, as well as control of the English language through which these subject areas are taught and learned. To do so is no small task, and this is where language educators can come to be the biggest resource/support during this process. My undergraduate degree program prepared me in such a way as to come to understand language as this ever-changing and evolving system. However, my teacher education did not. It was only in my practice teaching that I developed the philosophy that language can be found within all disciplines and affects everything. This is exactly how it should be taught. A lot of language teachers treat language as a separate entity, which exists away from all other subject areas. This is just not the case. Once I developed this mindset, I thought that I was ready for the language teaching world, as in my mind, based on my previously set out criteria, I had deemed myself to be a *competent* educator.

Native-speakerness is still considered to be a main criterion for language teacher ads (Johnson & Golombek, 2018, p. 36). Freshly out of teacher's college, I definitely found this to be the case when looking at English teaching ads for work abroad. Most of the job ads for Korea or China, which I came across, highlighted the importance of westerners and NS. When looking for job opportunities, NNESTs (Non-native English Speakers) chances of getting work are much more influenced by their race/accent as opposed to their professional qualifications (Johnson & Golombek, 2018, p. 36). This propels NNEST anxiety which is a sense of professional inadequacy that prevents qualified NNESTs from becoming confident instructors (Johnson & Golombek, 2018, p. 37). This was a concept with which I would become all too familiar very soon into my first teaching job. I briefly considered a career abroad as I met all of the criteria and standards, as well as the education component. However, before I had the chance to even apply, I was offered an English teaching position at a private Chinese run school in Kitchener, Ontario. I was excited, eager, and a little nervous, but I knew that I had all of the qualifications and requirements to do this job well. I was teaching a grade 12 university English course as well as an advanced level ESL course. I was ready for the adventure to begin. However, I was unaware of the uncomfortable situations as well as feelings of inadequacy I was about to face.

People understand their lives by narrating them and we all build our *storied selves* (Johnson & Golombek, 2018, p. 38). Teachers understand their practice and weave their identity through the act of telling narratives (Johnson & Golombek, 2018, p. 38). Narrative inquiry enables teachers to explore and articulate the tacit



connection between their identity and their instructional practices (Johnson & Golombek, 2018, p. 39). As an educator, I am no different from this. To this day, I tell stories of where I came from and stories of my day to day experiences, friendships, relationships, past experiences, and I do so all in the hopes of getting my students to share their narratives with me as a means of helping me create a more engaging and meaningful program for them; one which reflects their needs and interests. The *storied self* with which I presented my class, was not one which they imagined to be an *adequate* English teacher for them. I was not the typical Westerner which they had imagined should be teaching them English. I spoke with an Eastern European accent (all things that a *competent* English teacher is perhaps not).

Based on all of the previously mentioned criteria, my qualifications to be teaching English started being questioned. Language and discourse play a major role in society, as who we are to each other. In many contexts qualified NNESTs are positioned as *less able* professionals than NESTs (Native English speakers), and this is done by public discourse, institutions where they work, their colleagues, students, and even some everyday acquaintances (Johnson & Golombek, 2018, p. 32). This was exactly what was happening to me in this work environment. Just because I was not born in Canada or another English-speaking country, and because English was not my first language, I was deemed incompetent and not *good enough* to teach it. Parents started asking where and when I learned English, how long I had been teaching, some even deemed me inexperienced because I was young. They started devaluing me and making me feel like I did not belong there. The vast majority wondered how I was teaching English. What right did I have, as according to them I was not born into the English culture and thus knew nothing about it. While entirely confident before, I was slowly buying into these thoughts. I wondered, did I really belong there? What reaffirmed their thoughts even more so for me was when I would speak to family members back home about what I do. These family members did not seem to take me very seriously when I would say that I was an English teacher and would ask if I knew English well enough now to understand everyone around me, completely undermining that at this point I had lived in Canada for 20+ years and held 2 university degrees. This attitude of parents, students, and even my family members surrounding me perpetuated NNEST anxiety within me; a sense of professional inadequacy that prevents qualified NNESTs from becoming confident instructors (Johnson & Golombek, 2018, p. 42). I started second guessing my lessons and assignments, as well as any other instruction/directions which I gave the students. Simply put, my confidence started fading and in doing so, I started losing even more trust of students and parents, who had already decided that I do not in fact belong in this teaching role.

I had to decide whether I would completely abandon this teaching position or stay and re-establish myself as the English language amazing teacher that I deep down knew myself to be. In order to assert an identity



as legitimate professionals within the context of where they teach, NNESTs need to position themselves as equals/equally good (Johnson & Golombek, 2018, p. 39). This was exactly what I had decided to do. I was going to challenge this myth and find my way out of this disempowering discourse. My plan was to *re-story* myself and through doing so to establish greater professional legitimacy. What was expected of me was to teach students grammar and English culture and for them to do well on standardized tests so that they could get into a good school. I realized that in teaching in such a way I was reverting back to my old methods of teaching Serbian school (where students were not engaged or interested) because I thought that this was what was expected of me. I asked myself what my main goal was in this teaching position. The answer was simple: It was the initial ideology with which I entered this classroom—for students to have ownership of their own learning. I started to employ a method which I use in my classes and that is free writing. I refer back to a previously mentioned statement in this paper and that is one that people understand their lives by narrating them and we all build our *storied selves* (Johnson & Golombek, 2018, p. 40). I wanted my students to build their storied selves in English class and get out of it something which was relevant to their day to day lives.

Personally, I take the Vigotskyian stance and believe that instruction is more efficient when students engage in activities within supportive learning environments and when they receive appropriate guidance that is mediated by tools (Kaur, 2014, p. 6). In order for students to be successful, they need to be allowed some free range and wiggle room within their education. Just like language, education too is a living and breathing being which has and continues to evolve over time. While most areas of school are a must, students need to be able to take ownership of any school-related/subject area where possible. I feel that writing is one of those areas. During my time in this school, I had witnessed a lot of set rules and very little student input in their learning. Students were expected to learn grammar rules and verb conjugations, but really no reasoning was provided for this expectation. This should not be the case. Allowing/encouraging free and independent writing in ESL classes as opposed to traditional structured writing encourages the evolution of the storied self which I previously mentioned. Students are able to take ownership of their learning and get something meaningful to them out of this process. To illustrate the difference between the two, an independent writing prompt might ask students to write a letter to a friend or to write a short story, while a structured prompt would be much more specific (Kaur, 2014, p. 3). It might sound something like, *Write a letter to your friend describing a day on the beach (use the given pictures and words as a guide)* (Kaur, 2014, p. 3).

There are a lot of benefits in teaching and encouraging free writing in ESL classes. One of the main benefits is that by doing so, students are able to develop personally meaningful ways of using language to learn (Kaur,



2014, p. 2). What this means is that students would have the opportunity to play around with language and take ownership of it. They would not be confined by the established structures how their teachers want them to write, but rather what they want to write about themselves. Most ESL teachers deem this process to be too difficult for ESL students, and as a result, there is tension between control and opportunity. Teachers set out a lot of rules and boundaries in language classes. They turn language into a confined and sterile process, as they themselves are not aware that language is a living and breathing entity. They set out structures, rules, tips, and a checklist of requirements of what they deem *good* and *proper* speaking and writing to be. In doing so, students begin to see language as some mathematical formula process which they have to follow, rather than the ever-changing and evolving thing that it actually is. Since students are not always given the opportunity to freely write and express themselves as they wish, they do not know how to do so, and on occasion that they do have the opportunity to take part in free writing or any other unstructured activity, they are hesitant to do so as they do not want to be wrong. As a result, this turns a lot of students away from language classes as they feel they do not *have the language formula down* and are not comfortable expressing themselves in oral or in written form. My goal was to make students pursue more language classes and to love language, and through the incorporation of free writing into my program I feel that I achieved this goal.

My ultimate goal as a language teacher was to step out of the disempowering discourse into which I was placed as a NNES teacher but also to help my students step out of the disempowering discourse of being molded to pass standardized English tests and to recite grammar rules. I want my students to be able to re-story themselves as well. I need them to become confident and assertive in their knowledge of English and not afraid to take risks in this learning process. Just like I as a language educator needed to come to know English as a living and breathing being, my students need to know the exact same thing. This is not math that they are learning (where they are confined to formulas and strict rules) but rather they are in a world of language, where the possibilities are endless and mistakes are accepted, and in fact encouraged at times. I now go back to my question from the beginning of my paper. What makes a competent language educator? I am not sure I still have a definite answer, but what I do have are parts of it, I believe. Very quickly I realized that it takes much more than knowing the language to be qualified to teach a language. A competent language teacher needs to understand language as being alive and everchanging and never static. But, more importantly a competent language educator needs to be able to transfer this philosophy onto their students. Having faced the NS myth in my teaching career was not a hindrance but actually a learning opportunity for me. I believe that it made me a better language teacher. Through finding a way out of this disempowering discourse, I was able to help my students re-story themselves through the implementation of free writing within my classroom. As a result, language became personal and thus meaningful for them. As I continue



on through my language teaching career, I am still constantly growing, expanding, and reshaping my knowledge and pedagogy along with my students, and that is exactly how it should be.

References

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