

# A mare's NEST?

**Andrew Sampson** untangles learners' beliefs about native speakers.

Many language schools and other ELT organisations proudly advertise the fact that they have native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) among their staff, and this is often assumed to be what learners want. While the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000) dictates that organisations in the EU may not, in fact, discriminate against non-native speakers of English, ELT job adverts can still be found requesting 'native speakers only'. Employers seeking native speakers but wishing to appear to heed EU legislation may, of course, accept applications from non-native speakers and then choose to dismiss these on some other grounds.

While there has long existed a debate over the relative merits of NESTs and non-NESTs, what is often overlooked is the opinion of the learners themselves. Do learners actually prefer native-speaking teachers? And if so, why? This article reports on a small-scale survey conducted at a private language school in Spain to find out learners' preferences, and discusses the extent to which these opinions reflect current beliefs within the ELT profession.

## Data collection

A total of 30 adult learners of general English were asked if they preferred to be taught by a NEST or non-NEST, and why. The problems involved in actually defining NESTs and non-NESTs have been well documented, for example by George Kershaw, who asserts that

*'native speakerness is used as a yardstick for employability, and yet there appears to be no operative consensus as to what it entails'*. For the sake of simplicity, I told the learners in this survey that NESTs are teachers raised in an English-speaking country and non-NESTs are teachers raised in Spain.

While the wording of individual responses differed from one respondent to the next, there were broadly six types of response, as summarised in the box below.

***'NESTs can provide a better model of language, especially pronunciation.'***

Almost half the learners surveyed expressed a preference for a NEST on the assumed grounds of greater

linguistic competence, particularly in pronunciation. This reflects the traditional view, cited by Peter Medgyes, that, compared to NESTs, non-NESTs generally encounter more difficulties in *'fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, listening comprehension, grammar, and idiomatic English'* and NESTs are usually, as Robert Phillipson puts it, *'the final arbiter of the acceptability of any given sample of language'*. Recent studies into the language competence of native speakers (NSs) and proficient non-native speakers (NNSs) continue to reveal differences between them. Anna Siyanova-Chanturia and her colleagues, for example, find that even very proficient NNSs are slower to process idiomatic language when reading; Parvaneh Tavakoli finds that NNSs pause more often than NSs, and for longer periods, when speaking.

However, there are many cases of educated non-NESTs whose language competence is superior to that of many native speakers. Kimberley Mulder and Jan Hulstijn, for example, in their study into the competence of native Dutch speakers, found a high degree of variability in native speakers' language knowledge and skills. Mark Rebeck, surveying BBC radio online programmes, finds that native-speaker speech contains a wide variety of grammatically incorrect and lexically inappropriate utterances. Linguistic competence appears to depend not solely on whether a person is a native speaker or not, but rather on factors such as their level of education, profession and age. And, as Phillipson points out, in

Number of students	Prefer to be taught by a NEST or non-NEST?	Why?
14	NEST	<i>'NESTs can provide a better model of language, especially pronunciation.'</i>
6	Non-NEST	<i>'Since non-NESTs have learnt English as a second language, they are better qualified to teach it.'</i>
4	NEST	<i>'Since NESTs are more competent users of English than non-NESTs, they can focus their efforts on how best to teach it in the classroom, rather than on their own production of it.'</i>
3	Non-NEST	<i>'Non-NESTs are better equipped to diagnose learners' problems since they speak the same L1.'</i>
2	NEST	<i>'NESTs can teach about the target language culture.'</i>
1	No preference	No reason given.

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cases where the pronunciation of non-NESTs is not 'native-like', they can still provide learners with exposure to native accents by using 'recordings and other technical resources which now permit listeners to be exposed to a wide range of native speaker models'.

**'Since non-NESTs have learnt English as a second language, they are better qualified to teach it.'**

One fifth of the respondents expressed a preference for non-NESTs on the basis of their previous experience as L2 learners, a view supported by Medgyes: 'only non-NESTs can serve as imitable models of the successful learner of English'. Precisely because they have learnt English as a foreign or second language themselves, non-NESTs are often considered more able to teach learning strategies, analyse language and effectively anticipate potential learner problems and solutions.

However, such qualities can also be attributed to well-trained NESTs. Anticipating linguistic problems, suggesting possible solutions and raising awareness of learning strategies are techniques that are taught on initial teacher training courses such as CELTA and CertTESOL. On this point, Phillipson recognises that teachers, whether NESTs or non-NESTs, 'are made rather than born ... the insight that teachers have into learning processes, into the structures and usage of a language ... definitely have to be learnt'.

**'Since NESTs are more competent users of English than non-NESTs, they can focus their efforts on how to best teach it in the classroom, rather than on their own production of it.'**

As we have seen above, it is not necessarily true that NSs are more competent users of English than NNSs. And even if an NS does have highly developed linguistic awareness, this does not necessarily translate into the pedagogic ability or metalinguistic awareness required to be an effective teacher of the language. Phillipson goes so far as to say that without this ability and awareness, 'the untrained or

unqualified native speaker is potentially a menace'. Knowledge of effective teaching methodology for both NESTs and non-NESTs is a result of training and experience, and not necessarily of linguistic competence.

**'Non-NESTs are better equipped to diagnose learners' problems since they speak the same L1.'**

Medgyes claims that 'the ideal NEST is the one who has achieved a high degree of proficiency in the learners' mother tongue'; Phillipson agrees that in order to be effective teachers, NESTs should 'have a detailed acquaintance with the language ... of the learners'. While this would appear to be a major advantage of non-NESTs, given the usefulness of being able to contrast L1 and L2, the argument does appear to presuppose that the root of most linguistic difficulties is L1 interference, when in fact a great number of learners' developmental errors occur regardless of which mother tongue they speak. Jeremy Harmer also reasons that NESTs with no knowledge of their learners' L1 can still harness the mother tongue for pedagogical purposes by asking questions such as 'Do you have an expression for this in your language? Is it literally the same? Can you translate it back into English?'

**'NESTs can teach about the target language culture.'**

Two of the learners surveyed consider NESTs' knowledge of the target language culture to be an advantage. There is, of course, no reason why a non-NEST who has lived in an English-speaking country cannot also teach about cultural aspects.



Most of the learners surveyed stated a preference for native-speaking teachers, on the assumed grounds of superior language competence and performance and an ability to teach about the target language culture – supposed characteristics of NESTs which, as we have seen, may not necessarily be true. While some of the respondents recognised qualities that non-NESTs bring to the learning process, such as their experience as learners of English and their appreciation of potential pitfalls and learning strategies, the results suggest that schools and ELT organisations could do more to inform learners of the benefits of both kinds of teacher, particularly the benefits of non-

NESTs, and also of the crucial importance of teacher training and qualifications over native-speaker status. It would be very interesting to hear if other *ETp* readers have posed the 'NEST or non-NEST?' question to their learners and, if so, how they responded.

Given that native and non-native teachers bring different qualities to the learning process, surely the ideal scenario in any language teaching organisation is a balance of NESTs and non-NESTs, a balance that reflects the English-speaking world outside the classroom – a world in which, besides the 330 million or more speakers of English as an L1, there are some 235 million speakers of English as a second language. If our job is to prepare learners for real-life communication, then the most effective approach would appear to be one in which English is taught by qualified NESTs and non-NESTs alike, and which welcomes cultural and linguistic diversity. **ETp**

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