NONNATIVE ENGLISH-SPEAKING TEACHERS’ EXPERIENCES AND THEIR PEDAGOGY IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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Introduction

Teaching and learning by experience is a concept that is commonly used in education. However, research in general education often devalues and ignores individual experiences and backgrounds that may impact how teachers teach in the classroom (Freeman, 1996; Golombek, 1998). For more than a decade, teachers’ knowledge or their ways of knowing have been based on the notion that teaching and learning can only be transmitted to teachers (Freeman, 1996; Johnson & Golombek, 2002). Furthermore, traditionally, scholars have focused more on a set of separate teaching behaviors or routines drawn from quantitative research of what effective teachers do rather than giving attention to teachers’ perspectives and experiences (Freeman, 1996; Golombek, 1998; Johnson, 1996). Thus, it is often believed that teachers needed to learn theoretical and methodological models to prepare them for teaching in the classroom (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). However, Jackson (1990) points out in his classic, Life in Classrooms, that “teachers often do not rely on learning theory to guide their actions” but instead use their personal experience to justify their pedagogical decisions and teaching preferences (p. 167). More recently, many researchers have begun to view teaching in more complex ways, recognizing that teachers’ methods reflect beliefs and practical knowledge gained through their prior teaching and learning experiences (Berry, Clemans & Kostogriz, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 1999; Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Lortie, 2002). These studies have
finally come to acknowledge that “teachers are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with theoretical and pedagogical skills”, but that they have prior experiences and cultural and personal values that inform and shape their pedagogy (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, p. 401). Weedon (1997) further argues that, in light of the everyday experiences of teaching professionals, we “should not deny subjective experience, because the ways in which people make sense of their lives is a necessary starting point for understanding” how one teaches in the classroom (p. 8).

However, in the field of language teaching, most attention has been and continues to be paid to the different variables of second language learners, while far less attention is given to teachers and how their experiences impact the classroom. Although the literature regularly states that students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds play a key role in schooling (Au & Maaka, 2001; Fox & Gay, 1995; Nieto, 2001), research on the backgrounds and experiences that nonnative English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) bring to the ESL classroom and how these influence instruction is rare. In fact, there is a paucity of research examining the dynamic relationship between’ NNESTs’ experiences and their pedagogical approaches in the ESL classroom.

Around the world, nonnative speakers of English play central roles in English language teaching. Indeed, nonnative speakers of English outnumber native speakers at a four to one ratio (Crystal, 2003). This ratio is similar to that of native to nonnative English-speaking language teachers. According to Canagaragh (1999), it is estimated that 80% of English language teachers in the world are nonnative speakers. Thus, NNESTs’ experiences and how these have influenced their pedagogical approaches in the ESL classroom are of great importance for both
language teachers and students. This study focuses on NNESTs in the ESL teaching profession using a qualitative case study approach to explore the kinds of experiences that influence their pedagogical approaches in the ESL classroom. According to Simon (1987), pedagogy implies “the integration in practice of particular curriculum content and design, classroom strategies and techniques, and evaluation, purpose, and methods” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 2002, p. 262). Drawing on Simon’s work, the terms “pedagogical approach” or “teaching approach” are used in this study interchangeably with the term “pedagogy” to refer to the integration of teaching methods, classroom techniques, and instructional practices, as well as to how teachers perceive the nature of learning and what they do to create conditions in teaching students a second language.

The Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to increase understanding of NNESTs by exploring the kinds of experiences that have influenced their pedagogical approaches in the ESL classroom. Specifically, this study examines the kinds of experiences that have influenced their classroom practice. The overarching question that guides the study is the following: How do NNESTs’ experiences inform and guide their pedagogical approaches in the ESL classroom?

Related questions are:

1. What experiences/background do NNESTs draw upon when teaching ESL?
2. What approaches are used by NNESTs in the ESL classroom?
3. What cultural experiences inform and/or influence NNESTs’ pedagogical approaches in the ESL classroom?
4. What linguistic experiences inform and/or influence NNESTs’ pedagogical approaches in the ESL classroom?
5. What educational experiences inform and/or influence NNESTs’ pedagogical approaches in the ESL classroom?
Participants

NNEST participants in this study were recruited from various adult ESL programs and college-level intensive English programs in the Washington, D.C., area. These programs include private language programs and university academic ESL programs that serve adult international students and immigrants. It was within these contexts that the researcher recruited five NNESTs by distributing recruitment letters and contacting appropriate people to seek research participants for the study. Thus, the case study contexts in this research project were limited to NNESTs who work in various adult ESL programs and college-level intensive English programs and did not include NNESTS working in the K-12 context.

Since the purpose of this study is to understand NNESTs, it was important to select participants who had an L1 other than English and who had been educated outside of the United States. This was to ensure that the participants were culturally and linguistically different from native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), but also to be certain that the participants self-identified as NNESTs. The participants in the study were selected according to four criteria: (a) the participants must self-identify as NNESTs; (b) English must not be the participant’s first or native language; (c) the participants must currently be pursuing a master’s degree in a field related to TESOL/ESL education or have recently graduated from a program related to TESOL/ESL education; and (d) the participants must currently be working ESL instructors or teaching in a practicum in their master’s degree program. The participants were Suzanne1 from Egypt, Timothy from Korea, Cathy from Japan, Hannah from China, and Amanda from Argentina. The methods of data collection included: (a) in-depth interviews in person; (b)
open-ended and semi-structured email interviews; (c) review of lesson materials; and (d) class observations using an observation protocol adapted from Benke and Medgyes’ (2005) survey instrument. Only aspects of NNESTs’ teaching that had been found relevant to this study by the researcher were included in the observation protocol. A variety of data sources were used as a means of triangulation (Merriam, 1998).

Results and Discussion

Past Linguistic, Educational, and Cultural Experiences Inform Pedagogy

Freeman and Johnson (1998) argue that what teachers know about teaching is “largely socially constructed out of the experiences and classrooms from which teachers have come” (p. 400). In other words, Freeman and Johnson contend that much of what language teachers know about teaching derives from their past experiences as students, language learners, and language teachers. The data collected in this study support Freeman and Johnson’s argument and particularly demonstrate that participants’ pedagogical approaches are heavily impacted by their linguistic, educational, and cultural experiences. Even though the participants grew up in different countries, had different native languages, and learned English in different environments, they all asserted in their interviews that their experiences as second language learners influenced their current pedagogical approaches to language teaching in the ESL classroom. For example, in describing how his past linguistic experiences influenced his current pedagogical approaches, Timothy said,

There are about 20 students in my ESL class. As I was observing their struggles to learn English, I immediately felt deep compassion for them, and I wanted to help them the best way I could. Being a second language learner myself, I positioned myself as a student, not as a teacher as I thought about how to help them. I knew that could help me to facilitate students to learn more efficiently. My experiences as a second language
learner are incorporated in teaching ESL. Though these experiences are good or even bad sometimes, I try to incorporate what I learn from those situations to come up with teaching methodology that is appropriate for my students.

Similarly, Lee and Lew (2001) reported that nonnative teacher trainees enrolled in a M.A. program in TESOL “unanimously agreed that the most valuable asset is their experience as learners of English” (p. 146). They presented the following quotation from one of their participants who believed that her linguistic experiences positively impacted her lesson planning: “I can understand and feel what the professor is saying about the theories, and I can put myself into the learners’ shoes when I am preparing a lesson plan” (p. 146). Like the participants in the Lee and Lew’s study, all teachers in the current study indicated that they drew upon their language learning experiences and educational backgrounds to guide and inform their pedagogy in the ESL classroom.

In the interview transcripts, the participants in the study specifically elaborated on their language learning experiences to provide context to which their methods of language learning were used and indicated that their previous experiences provided a solid basis for developing further as language teachers. For instance, looking back at their linguistic experiences, all of the participants eloquently shared their personal experiences with the unsuccessful and successful way they were taught English. Although most of their language learning experiences were not positive as they talked about the poor methods that were often utilized in their native EFL classrooms, they built on both negative and positive aspects of their language learning experiences to develop methods that they felt were beneficial to their ESL students. For example, in explaining her approach to ESL teaching utilizing her own experience as an ESL learner, Amanda commented,
My former teachers used too structured ways of teaching. They used set books that were very tedious with lots of exercises, and they focused on rote memorization on grammar rules and passages. I think it was the way I learned a language that helped me the way I teach right now. Because I didn’t like the behaviorist model of teaching, I vowed not to have my classes too structured. I learned from my former bad and good English teachers by not incorporating what I didn’t like but incorporating what I liked when learning English to help me teach my students.

In addition, the participants in the study believed that their educational experiences in English-speaking countries inspired their pedagogical approaches in the ESL classroom. Three of the five participants specifically recalled that when they arrived in an English-speaking country for the first time, they felt inadequate since they could not successfully communicate with native English-speakers. It was through this experience they realized that the ability to communicate competently in the target language should be a fundamental component of language learning. The participants then modified their teaching methods to accomplish this goal. As Timothy explained:

In the EFL teaching situation, the context is very different in terms of their cultural elements. There are also many obstacles in practicing the CLT [communicative language teaching] in an EFL class. The teacher has more authority and students are not active in the class activities. Even though I didn’t learn English through CLT approach, I would definitely adapt the CLT approach to the EFL and ESL situations as much as possible because language learning is achieved by real communication, not through textbooks only. So, I try to use CLT approach as much as I can in my current ESL classroom. It is very important for ESL students to communicate with English-speaking people. I would not want my students to go through what I went through when I first came to the United States.

While all teachers similarly expressed that their use of alternative teaching approaches derived from their past linguistic experiences, they also indicated that they could not have generated different methods of teaching without having gone through educational programs in
English-speaking countries. All teachers noted that going through their master’s degree programs in TESOL or related fields of education in the United States forced them to reflect on their own language learning and teaching experiences, which allowed them to construct their own understanding of what constitutes good ESL teaching. In such programs, the participants were able to compare and contrast their learning experiences to create a “new sense of meaning and significance” and to take appropriate teaching action in their ESL classrooms (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p. 42). Reflecting on her linguistic and educational experiences, Cathy provided this response about how her master’s program was influential in teaching her own class:

In Japan, I was in a very traditional classroom where the teacher was the authority figure. A teacher would just have a lecture, and students will take notes from that kind of environment. So I know that affected my teaching in a way. To me inductive learning is important. So I intend to take a learner center approach. However, sometime I found myself being very deductive, doing a lecture like presentation. So for me, to ensure I use a learner center approach, basically, I have or I normally give them some prompts that encourage students to have a discussion in class. If I didn’t receive education here in this M.A. program, I wouldn’t know how to do that. Because a deductive approach is the only one I knew, if you don’t know any other way or have other knowledge, you would start teaching based on what you know. Having gone through this education system helped me think about my past experiences in learning English. I think eventually that helped me come up with ideas what I can do in the classroom.

Regarding this point, Hannah similarly commented:

My teaching methodology comes from my professors’ instruction in my graduate program as well as my own learning and teaching experiences. I combine all of them in my class. If there is really a hard concept that I want to teach my students, then I use my own experience to come up with an idea. How did I learn this? Then, they usually get something from it.
It was through this process that the participants also learned what was important in language learning and also deepened their understanding of what was faulty with their countries’ educational systems. It was their exposure to different learning and teaching contexts in the American higher educational system that afforded them with new ideas for pedagogical approaches that were relevant to their ESL classrooms.

Scholars have argued that pre-service teachers who come to the art of teaching with little cross-cultural experience and knowledge may not only be ill prepared to teach, they may also have limited visions of what cultural teaching entails in the classroom (Fox & Gay, 1995; Nieto, 2000). Being NNESTs, the participants in the study have necessarily had personal experiences in cross-cultural issues; they are culturally and linguistically diverse individuals and also have varied ESL and EFL teaching experiences. As a result of these experiences, the participants did not have any problem appreciating and acknowledging their students’ different backgrounds. In fact, this understanding has influenced the teaching in their ESL classrooms. For example, the participants expressed that their understanding of their own culture, as well as that of others, allowed them to be open-minded to various ways of learning and teaching in the ESL classroom. The following excerpt from Timothy’s interview transcripts is an example of how he was able to integrate cultural knowledge into his ESL instruction.

My Korean cultural experiences are incorporated in teaching ESL. With understanding of various cultural differences among students in ESL classrooms, I try to create appropriate activities to ensure that there is cultural diversity and cultural understanding in teaching. For example, some Asian ESL learners are more reluctant in expressing themselves compared with other cultural ethnic groups, such as South American students. So, I come up with group activities to direct them to participate in the activities by not making them feel embarrassed.
Most NNESTs are often bilingual or multilingual, and the participants commented that their understanding of their own cultural differences helped them easily appreciate students’ different cultures and thus provide appropriate pedagogical approaches in their ESL classrooms. This finding is consistent with several previous studies (Amin, 2004; Kamhi-Stein, 1999; Medgyes, 1994) that found that NNESTs’ experiences as ESL learners positively impacted their teaching ability because they had a “privileged understanding” of the potential linguistic and cultural issues of their ESL students (Tang, 1997, p. 578). For example, Amin’s (2004) study of minority immigrant women teachers of ESL reported that since NNESTs are multilingual and familiar with a number of cultures, they are able to use these qualities to implement “successful pedagogical strategies” beneficial to their ESL students (2004, p. 69).

It appears that the participants’ broad, reflective worldviews of their linguistic, educational, cultural experiences help them not only to have patience and appreciation for students’ diverse backgrounds but also to include diverse ways of teaching that are more linguistically and culturally appropriate for their ESL students. As Dewey (1938) argues, when teachers reflect on their experiences and “question their own assumptions as they uncover who they are, where they have come from, and what they know and believe, and why they teach as they do” (Johnson & Golombek, 2002, p. 5), they more fully recognize the contexts in which they teach and are able to change the conditions and take appropriate actions in educating their students.

**NNESTs Do Not Prefer Traditional Teaching Approaches**

Previous studies have shown that native speaker (NS) and nonnative speaker (NNS) teachers have distinctly different teaching approaches or behaviors in language classes (Arva &
Medgyes, 2000; Benke & Arva, 2005; Medgyes, 1994). For example, these studies identify NESTs as being informal and flexible, using different techniques, methods, and approaches in the teaching of ESL, while NNESTs rely mostly on textbooks, utilizing traditional forms of teaching that focus more on structured lesson plans and teacher-centered learning.

In contrast, in the survey results of the current study, 20% strongly disagreed and 80% disagreed with the statement that they prefer traditional forms of teaching in the ESL classroom. The survey responses did not vary considerably among the participants, and the results coincided with the participants’ stated teaching practices in interviews and their actual teaching practices in the ESL classroom observations. The majority of the teaching practices that were explored in the survey indicated that none of the participants favor traditional forms of teaching, rather focusing more on communicative skills when teaching in the ESL classroom. In fact, the results of the survey indicated that the participants preferred using more authentic lesson materials over textbooks in the class, in order to provide activities that are student-centered and communication-focused.

The observation data revealed that all the participants used more non-traditional forms of teaching, relying on pair and group work in the ESL classroom and adjusting their classroom practices to meet the needs of their students. For example, many of the participants’ planned and improvised activities required interactions in the target language among students and between the teacher and students. Furthermore, the participants indicated that they encouraged expression of thoughts and ideas by their students on a regular basis to ensure that students had participated actively. This also allowed the participants to better understand their students in the classroom. This practice was evident during observations: students often
responded spontaneously to questions posed by the instructors or fellow classmates. The participants also used a variety of classroom activities and instructional strategies to teach their students, focusing primarily on authentic communicative skills, in particular on improving students’ speaking and listening skills. In order to accomplish these objectives, the participants utilized authentic reading and listening materials that included audio and on-line video resources. For instance, all of the participants used pair and group work regularly in class and often employed ample supplementary materials to make learning more interactive and meaningful for the students.

To accomplish the objective to teach communicative skills, the majority of classroom practices integrated active and cooperative learning through pair and group work by purposefully utilizing discussion strategies and interactive language prompts (e.g., for giving opinions or asking questions). These practices engaged students’ interests in the language content as well as the topic covered in the class. Despite the fact that all of the participants were themselves mostly taught by traditional lecture methods, where the teacher was perceived as the authority in the classroom, none of the participants identified themselves as lecturers or traditional teachers. The results of this study contradicted previous findings that suggested that, NNESTs tend to prefer traditional forms of teaching while NESTs adopted a more flexible teaching, judged from both teachers’ and students’ perspectives (Arva & Medgyes, 2000; Benke & Medgyes, 2005).

All of the participants, with the exception of Suzanne, rarely relied on textbooks and instead used authentic language materials to teach the target language. Some of these authentic language materials included pictures, newspaper articles, on-line resources, and real
life scenarios. While only two out of five participants had actual lesson plans and followed them, three participants indicated that they generally did not craft formal lesson plans for each lesson. Despite their lack of formal lesson plans, these three participants created some type of informal lesson outlines that had goals to accomplish in the classroom and planned lesson objectives and activities for each class session to ensure that they had productive classes that followed the curriculum guidelines of their schools.

**Nonnative Status as a Source of Pedagogy**

In second or foreign language teaching, it is often believed that language teachers who teach their native language have more advantages over teachers who are not native speakers of the language they teach (Canagaragh, 1999; Phillipson, 1992). This notion is referred as the native speaker fallacy because obviously, not all native speakers make good language teachers (Phillipson, 1992). However, due to this fallacy, NNESTs are often not considered as competent as their NEST counterparts (Kamhi-Stein, 2004; Lee, 2008; Thomas, 1999). Furthermore, in the past there was even a notion that in order for NNESTs to become “good teachers”, they should not only “improve their linguistic skills to match those of native speakers, but they should also adopt the teaching practices and methods of NESTs” (Mahboob, 2004, p. 139). To illustrate this point, Sheorey (1986) supported the idea that the goal of NNESTs was to bring their own teaching practices “in line with those of native teachers” (p. 310). However, since then many scholars have maintained that NNESTs can be successful ESL teachers. Having undergone the process of acquiring English as an additional or foreign language themselves, they are more aware of their students’ linguistic needs (Cook, 2005; Medgyes, 1994; Phillipson, 1992; Tang, 1997).
Similarly, the findings of the current study showed that the participants’ pedagogical approaches in the classroom were not only heavily influenced by their past linguistic, educational, and cultural backgrounds but were also impacted by their status as NNESTs. Being nonnative speakers, the participants were able to utilize their L2 experiences as well as their cultural and educational experiences to become more effective teachers in the teaching of ESL by providing the social conditions that have been conducive to language learning (Norton-Pierce, 1995). For example, the participants voiced their ability to appreciate more clearly their students’ linguistic and cultural problems in learning English because they had similar difficulties in acquiring the target language. For instance, Amanda provided this response, “NNESTs probably know the students’ native language and culture... [we] offer a variety of perspectives and use [our] experiences as immigrants and second language learners as sources of knowledge.” As a result of this understanding, the participants, especially Suzanne, Timothy, and Cathy, stated that they provided more wait time when students spoke in the classroom and created abundant opportunities for congenial social interactions that encouraged timid students to participate in a more comfortable environment, often utilizing pair and small group work. Drawing on her nonnative status to help her students in the classroom, one of the participants, Cathy commented:

Since I speak another language and learned English same as my students, perhaps I can better understand students and of their difficulties as well as frustration in learning a second language. I think being bilingual is similar to being a nonnative speaker teacher. In that sense, I feel I can offer some strategies to help them overcome their challenges so they can learn English more efficiently and effectively. In the classroom, I explain concepts more in a detailed fashion because I want to ensure they get what I am trying to teach them. I tend to be very patient with my students but especially with my struggling students. I know exactly how they feel.
Cathy here expresses that one teaching strategy she uses in her ESL classroom is to automatically give more in-depth explanations of concepts since she does not take for granted concepts that may seem familiar to mainstream students but are often unfamiliar to international ESL students. Timothy used a similar activity to allow more timid students to participate in a non-threatening environment; he often used small group activities to teach students new language expressions. In fact, all the participants in the study claimed that being nonnative teachers provided them with a privileged understanding of the problems and weaknesses their students face in learning English and that this understanding allowed them to develop appropriate pedagogical approaches in the ESL classroom (Amin, 2004; Tang, 1997). These participants have demonstrated convincingly that “a good pedagogy is not the province of the native speaker” (Amin, 2004, p. 73) but is dependent more on developing their own teaching models of ESL as they embrace their status as NNESTs.

**Conclusion**

While it has been noted in the literature that NNESTs often disregard or sometimes disguise their status because they are often not considered as competent at English language teaching as their native English-speaking counterparts (Kamhi-Stein, 2004; Liu, 1999), research may actually suggest that nonnative status is a professional asset in teaching ESL. Similar to Kamhi-Stein’s (1999) findings, which suggested that “nonnative status contributes to the development of positive self-perceptions regarding [teaching] practices” (p. 97), this study found that the participants utilized their status as NNESTs to positively inform their pedagogical approaches in the ESL classroom. All of the participants in the study indicated that they do not use the native speaker as their model; rather, they implement effective pedagogy in the ESL
classroom based on their differences as language learners and NNES teachers in various contexts. Using their varied linguistic, educational, and cultural experiences as language learners and NNESTs, the participants were able to comfortably teach in new ESL contexts using alternative teaching methods that may have seemed unconventional to them in the past.

Thus, the major implication of this study is that nonnative teachers must take pride in their status as NNESTs and start to embrace their differences and their varied experience to explore new possibilities in their classrooms. Insights from the interview data and observations have illustrated that the NNESTs described in the study are able to convey the message that they are highly competent and capable in the ESL teaching contexts despite their self-perceived deficiency as NNESTs. As was evidenced in this study, NNESTs have unique strengths and experiences that their native English-speaking counterparts often do not share. Therefore, even though NNESTs are often perceived as less competent language teachers (Kamhi-Stein, 2004), they should not let these perceptions limit their teaching possibilities in the ESL classroom.

Furthermore, since the data in this study show that the participants’ pedagogical approaches have been influenced by their past linguistic, educational, and cultural experiences, the study suggests that teacher education programs should encourage future NNES students to examine their varied linguistic, educational, and cultural experience in relation to theories of language acquisition, language teaching, and curriculum design. When NNESTs are encouraged to draw upon their past linguistic, cultural, and educational experiences and make effective connections between their past and present experiences, they are engaged in exploring new perspectives in second language learning and teaching. Kamhi-Stein (1999) makes a strong case for M.A. TESOL programs to incorporate curriculum and instruction on issues related to
nonnative speakers by asserting that such actions will instill confidence in future NNESTs that their diverse experiences and differences are important sources of skillful second language learning and teaching. When teacher education programs help future teachers to foster an understanding of their diverse backgrounds and differences, they will not only promote improvement of NNESTs’ teaching competency, but they will also assist NNESTs to view their nonnative status as a professional asset in ESL teaching (Kamhi-Stein, 2004).

Several scholars agree that research on non-native teachers has become widely recognized and will continue to grow, as there is tremendous interest in issues related to NNESTs in both ESL and EFL contexts (Braine, 1999; Kamhi-Stein, 2004; Liu, 1999). While the scope of this study is obviously limited, as it studied only five subjects, the study does argue for the importance of understanding the backgrounds and experiences that NNESTs bring to the classroom when they are teaching diverse ESL students. However, in order to better understand the complexity of NNESTs in the ESL teaching profession and how their experiences influence their pedagogy in the classroom, it is important to consider that great variation among NNESTs emerges in terms of their experiences, their challenges, and their teaching approaches. Thus, more in-depth studies should be conducted in different contexts around the world to examine individual differences among NNESTs.
References


