Teaching as a Native (Chinese) Speaker and a Nonnative (English) Speaker:
Different Identities, Similar Needs

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Introduction

Presumably, teaching a language as a non-native speaker is in some ways a different experience from teaching a language as a native speaker. Here I examine my experience of teaching ESL as a non-native English teacher at the same time as I was teaching a class in my native language, Chinese, to explore the differences I perceived.

A native speaker is defined by Chomsky (1965) as “an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly.” Being born and being raised in China, I acquired Chinese as my first language and I identify as a native Chinese speaker. Having only started to learn English as a teenager and having never spoken it at home, I identify as a nonnative English speaker.

Although much research has been done on non-native English teachers’ (NNEST) self-perceptions (Medgyes, 1992; Reves & Medgyes, 1994; Samimi & Griffler, 1999; Inbar-Lourie, 1999; Liu, 1999; Liu, 2005; Llurda & Huguet, 2003), and students’ perceptions of NNESTs (Liang, 2002; Benke & Medgyes, 2005; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005), one type of self-perception research that has been missing is comparative studies of those who teach their first language (L1) and another language (often a second language or L2) at the same time. Having had opportunity to teach Chinese as a native speaker while simultaneously teaching English as a
non-native speaker, I have had the opportunity to reflect on the similarities and differences of these experiences. This has helped me better understand my strengths and weaknesses both as a native and non-native language teacher. In particular, this research has led me to realize the important role professional development plays for any language teacher.

Background

As a second year MA student at an American university, I was offered two teaching positions in the fall of 2008: one, teaching beginning Chinese to undergraduate students at American University, and another, co-teaching high-beginning English to a group of adult learners, as part of my master’s practicum at Montgomery College in Silver Spring, MD. Teaching the two languages at the same time made me aware that I have different identities when I teach different languages: in my Chinese class, I am a native speaker teacher who has a high command of the target language and who is well familiar with the Chinese culture. In my ESL class, I am a non-native speaker teacher who is still learning the nuances of the target language while at the same time being “obligated to represent a foreign language with its cultural load” (Medgyes, 1994, p.37). This research compares my perceptions of these roles and identities as I taught each of these classes.

Both student audiences were new to me. Before entering the MA program at American University, I taught Middle School English in China for three and half years. The proficiency of most of my Chinese students was beginning level—their first task was to learn the Roman alphabet. Although students in my U.S. classes were also deemed to be at beginning level, they were all adults who were more much more mature. Consequently classroom management,
participation, and students’ approaches to learning differed. Despite these similarities, the
students in the Chinese language class were all highly literate in their native language (English)
and reasonably well self-disciplined. Also, the course syllabus and course texts were designed
for a U.S. audience, so they conformed to the students’ cultural and educational expectations
well.

The literacy and language backgrounds in my ESL class was much more diverse (as I
determined through needs analysis survey conducted in the first class) with several native
languages being represented and many students having experienced limited or interrupted
education in their own countries. Consequently, regardless of the language I was teaching, I
was also teaching two different student audiences—student audiences I had never
encountered in teaching before.

In order to take on both roles successfully, I needed to overcome various challenges in
both classes--some of the challenges were relative to my language competence, and some of
them related to my lack of other professional skills, such as classroom management and lesson
pacing. To meet these challenges, I had to grow as a professional and this study is a reflection
of that process.

What is a “professional” language teacher?

A professional, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is “a person engaged in a
profession, esp. one requiring special skill or training; a professional person, or a member of the
professional classes” (OED, 2009). According to Webster’s Third International New English
Dictionary, a professional is “one who belongs to one of the learned professions or is in an occupation requiring a high level of training and proficiency.”

One attempt to establish the qualities of professional competence in teaching is Taylor’s (2008). She has created a model of professional competence that represents various professional teaching qualities in terms of how they can balance one another. Taylor portrays professional competence as a triangle (Figure 1), with each leg representing “practice,” “commitment,” and “relationship.” Taylor notes that “practice” is the element teachers are most commonly evaluated on. For Taylor, “practice” includes elements such as designing good lesson plans, managing classes effectively, and delivering clear instructions. “Commitment” refers to the teachers’ commitment “to their students, to the institution, to the profession, and to communication” (Taylor, 2008). “Relationship” refers to the teachers’ relationship with themselves, their colleagues, supervisors, and of course, their students.

![Figure 1: The Triangle of Professional Competence.](image)
To quantify those three dimensions of professionalism, Taylor asks teachers to assess their own teaching competence by assigning each leg a value of 1 to 3 points. Taylor also proposes that to be minimally effective as a teacher, one needs to be evaluated at a score of 2 or more on each leg. A score of 1 on any leg will make the triangle unstable and consequently, the teacher cannot be considered as an efficient or “professional” teacher. Additionally, Taylor insists on whole number ratings to force user commitment to the process. Scores with fractions (e.g., 2.5) are not allowed. Moreover, scores are based on the teacher’s competence only (comparing one’s self to others, especially those more advanced in the field, is not allowed). Finally, a teacher’s total score should be evaluated within the context of that teacher’s life. For example a financial, family, or health crisis can obviously affect commitment to teaching, so a temporary decline in one’s commitment, while never desirable, may be understandable in a broader context.

To show audiences how to this model operates, Taylor (2008) employs case studies. For example:

Katherine is a teacher “loved by her students; she is a model teacher at her school; she satisfies all obligations, but does not attend optional events or participate in faculty social events; she is thought of as friendly despite not being around a lot; and she calls in sick more often than other teachers.” In this case, Katherine might be evaluated as a score of 3 for “practice,” a 2 for “commitment,” and a 2 for relationship. Although Katherine doesn’t earn a perfect score, she is still considered to be an adequate instructor because she earns at least a 2 for each leg (slide 11)

Another case is Ben. Ben is a retired missionary; he has lived abroad for 30 years; he is new to teaching adult ESL; he has not received TESL training; he
has strong rapport with his students; he is reliable and dedicated; he is never late. However, he talks too much in class; his lessons lack opportunities for student practice; and he provides minimal corrective feedback to his students. In this case, Ben might obtain a 1 for “practice,” a 3 for “commitment,” and a 3 for “relationship.” Since he earns less than a 1 for one leg, he would not be considered as a “professional” teacher according to Taylor (slide 12).

When I applied this model to my own self-evaluation, I found I was not able to consider myself a fully professional teacher of Chinese before my class started. As a Native Chinese Speaking Teacher (NCST), I had an excellent command of fluent, idiomatically correct language forms. I also knew the cultural connotations and pragmatic usages of Chinese. However, I had not yet received any formal training in Chinese linguistics or teaching. For example, I am still learning the underlying rules of Chinese and I am still seeking effective methods for teaching Chinese characters. Consequently, even if all the training that I have received as an English teacher could be successfully transferred to my Chinese teaching I believe that, I would still score low on the “practice” leg of the triangle. Therefore, I would rate my “practice” as 1. That is to say, I lack explicit knowledge about teaching Chinese and this makes my triangle of professional competence unstable.

As for “relationship,” even though I was confident about building a good rapport with my students and other instructors, I still felt I could not yet rate myself a full 3 because I was only beginning to establish relationships with students and other teachers. Therefore, I decided that a score of 2 might be more appropriate. As for “commitment,” I was passionate and determined to commit myself to my students, the program, and the profession. I believe I earn a “3” in terms of the “commitment.” Therefore, I rated my overall professional competence in
my Chinese class as 1 for practice; a 2 for relationship; and a 3 for commitment. If this self-assessment is reasonably accurate it suggests that I am not yet a competent Chinese language teacher, and to become one I need to address limitations in my “practice.”

As for my ESL class at Montgomery College, I couldn’t entirely consider myself a professional there either. I feel that my knowledge of English is not yet sufficient, especially in terms of cultural knowledge and pragmatic skills. When I taught in China, I was proud of myself as a professional English teacher, and I was recognized as a professional by my colleagues and students. I was confident in my knowledge in English, my teaching skills, and my “standard” pronunciation. Therefore, it was frustrating to discover that my “excellent English” (as it was judged in China) had suddenly become problematic in the context of an U.S ESL classroom (see Mahboob, 2007 for a discussion of a familiarity based approach to evaluating language proficiency). It caused me to doubt my ability to be an ESL teacher in the U.S., even though I know: (1) I can be a good ESL teacher without being a perfect user of English, and (2) that students “largely tolerate of the differences between their NESTs and NNESTs, including accents” (Braine, 2005, p.22.). Still, anxieties persisted, “How can I be a professional teacher if I am not a perfect user of this language?” “What am I going to do if students doubt or laugh at my ‘Chinglish’ (spoken or written English which is influenced by Chinese)?” “How can I responsibly explain to my students elements of a language that I do not completely command?” Such insecurities caused me to rate my “practice” leg in ESL as 1.

Considering “relationship,” as was the case with my Chinese language class, I was only starting to build relationships with the students and colleagues, so I rated myself a 2 for
“relationship.” Still, I was as committed to my ESL class as I was to my Chinese class, so I evaluated my “commitment” score as 3. Overall then, I evaluated my professional competence in my ESL class with the same numerical ratings as I had given myself for Chinese teaching: a 1 for practice; a 2 for relationship; and a 3 for commitment.

These results spurred me to try to grow professionally as quickly as possible. I started to develop strategies to work on all three legs of my professional competence triangle simultaneously. I found that despite having different teacher identities in each class, my areas of professional need in both classes were quite similar (see Professional development I and II below). What was different was the nature of the specific challenges and how to address them so that I could grow in practice (see Professional Development III below).

**Professional Development I: Relationships**

“Relationship,” as was mentioned before, refers to teachers’ relationships with “themselves, their colleagues, supervisors, and students” (Taylor, 2008). In both of the classes, I made continuing efforts develop relationships of mutual respect with my students, friendly relationships with my colleagues and supervisors, and a trusting relationship with myself.

In my Chinese class at the beginning of the semester, I designed a questionnaire to learn about students’ educational and foreign language backgrounds, their interests, goals, and learning styles. I then tried to design lessons based on those needs. For example, many students had language learning experiences before and had therefore had some clear ideas on how to learn a language effectively. To make use of this knowledge, I held a discussion session, allowing students to share their learning methods. By doing so, students who hadn’t yet had
any language learning experiences were able to benefit from their peers’ experience in order to develop some strategies to succeed in their learning, and those with experience were empowered for having their learning strategies validated.

At mid-term I asked student to provide me with a second evaluation to give me suggestions to improve the class. In the feedback, many students said they preferred the “One-to-One Kazoo Correction” activity over the “Kazoo Dialogue” (kazoos were used to develop students’ awareness of tones in Chinese). Also, I learned that a few students were interested in taking field trips. I adjusted my class accordingly. Students were pleased that I responded. Respecting students, valuing their voices, and being modest about my own authority earned me the students’ respect.

In addition to developing a good rapport with students, I also wanted to build relationships with my Chinese colleagues at American University. Throughout the entire semester, I had informal conversations over lunch with the two Chinese professors with whom I worked. We could discuss the questions and concerns I had as a novice Chinese teacher and I share my feelings with them. This relationship became an indispensable element in my professional development. It provided me with chances to observe the others’ classes which strengthened my “practice.” By comparing their classes with mine, I was more aware of where I needed to improve and where I was doing well. For example, I was not comfortable giving enough wait time in Chinese class. After observing my colleagues, I began to develop a sense of how much time students needed for processing questions, and I was able to build it into my classes. So strengthening my relationships also strengthened my practice.
Also, I paid attention to developing a friendly relationship with my supervisor. I invited her to observe my class and afterward she provided me with feedback. I also asked her for suggestions when I encountered unexpected problems. Particularly in terms of how to deal with administrative matters, she was an invaluable resource.

These efforts paid dividends. They helped me earn respect and trust from students, colleagues, and supervisors. Although I still viewed myself as a novice teacher, my positive interactions with others increased self esteem and allowed me to develop a better relationship with “myself,” as well as with students and colleagues.

In my ESL class, I made similar efforts to grow in terms of “relationship.” At the beginning of the semester, I handed out a questionnaire similar to the one I gave to my Chinese students. From the questionnaire, I learned many students in my ESL class still had literacy issues. Consequently, I tried to provide them with some basic learning strategies, such as when and how to take notes. In addition to the questionnaire, I made other efforts show my respect for my students. First of all, my limited knowledge of the cultures of my students’ home countries such as West Africa and Ethiopia made me feel distanced from them. For example, I was not sure how to pronounce the names of many students. However, I did learn all their names before the course began. I also made an effort to pay attention to each student, giving all fair opportunities to practice in class. Third, I never went to a class unprepared. I felt strongly that I maintained my “relationship” with my students well.

Feedback from a mid-term evaluation increased my confidence, since most students mentioned how much they enjoyed the class. This reduced my anxiety about my English
competence. I came to realize that what really mattered to the students was not my identity as an NNEST but my professional competence. The evaluation also showed the students’ appreciation for the independent learning resources I had provided (e.g., as online dictionaries with sound files for pronunciation). Paying attention to the students’ needs and their voices helped me earn their respect.

As for “relationship” with the colleagues, because my host instructor was the only teacher with whom I interacted on daily basis in my ESL class, I tried my best to be as good a guest as possible in her classroom and balance our relationship; particularly in regards to how much I should be involved in her class and what roles I should play. For example, I did my best to design my lessons to fit her lesson format and I sent my lesson plans to her, asking for her feedback, before I taught the lessons. I also took an active role in arranging pair-work, group work, and in helping students who needed additional attention. I believe the efforts earned me my host instructor’s respect and support. In return, she provided me with helpful feedback. The mutual trust that developed gave me enough flexibility to be able to develop my own teaching style while respecting the procedures and practices of her class.

My students’ trust and the host instructor’s support made me more confidence about my ability to teach the ESL class. It helped me develop trust in myself, which was crucial to my success for professional development. I started to believe that even though my NNEST language competence was different from that of NESTs, colleagues and students evaluated me in terms of teaching skills as much as my English proficiency. In fact, I realized how other professional
skills can balance language proficiency, so that NNESTS like me can be identified as competent English teachers.

Professional Development II: Commitment

My primary “commitment” was keeping my students engaged and motivated. In both my Chinese class and the ESL class, I used all the available resources and methods I could find to make my classes more fun and effective. For example, in my Chinese class, I designed a game of charades, which proved to be a fun and efficient way for my students to learn the Chinese characters. By acting out what they saw on the character cards, students could practice character recognition and pronunciation at the same time. In my ESL class, I downloaded many pictures of my students’ home countries as discussion points of departure and used examples related to their work to motivate their background knowledge. In both classes, I encouraged my students to become my “Skype” (an on-line audio chat tool) friends so we could initiate more informal conversations in the target language whenever they felt comfortable.

My commitment to professional growth also caused me to seek out additional feedback. I invited one of my MA in TESOL classmates, a seasoned ESL teacher, to observe my Chinese class during the first two weeks. After each class, we would discuss our perceptions of the class. We looked at my pacing, instructional language, class atmosphere, and the difficulties she encountered when she also tried to learn Chinese in my class. Those discussions not only helped me to be more aware of learners’ attitudes about my class, and also inspired me to develop new ways of teaching. For example, applying to knowledge gained in the Teaching Pronunciation course we had taken in our TESOL program, my classmate encouraged me to use
kazoos to help students heard better hear the tonal differences of Chinese. While some students were doubtful of using this toy at first, they later saw its benefits, giving it the highest rating for effectiveness of all the methods they evaluated on a midterm feedback form.

I also made a commitment to interview many of the second year Chinese learners at American University, asking them for suggestions for useful resources for learning Chinese. From them, I learned of on-line resources such as Zhongwen.com (Harbaugh, 2006) and Yellow Bridge” (Lau, 2009) and shared them with my current students. My colleagues also encouraged me to join the Chinese Language Teachers’ Association (CLTA), so I became a member and have begun to participate in this community.

As part of my professional commitment to my ESL class, I regularly attended professional workshops, observed my host instructor’s classes, and other ESL teachers’ classes. I joined professional organizations such as TESOL and WATESOL, just as I had joined comparable Chinese teacher associations. Professional participation has provided me with different perspectives about developing professionally. Professional dialogues have helped me accept that language teachers can be competent in many different ways, and to understand that there will never be a perfect language teacher. I now remind myself of this whenever I begin to feel anxiety about my English proficiency.

In the end, my commitment to being a professional language teacher implied a commitment to professional growth. I realized that it didn’t matter whether I was a native speaker language teacher or a non-native speaker language teacher, what mattered was having
“commitment” to professional competence. If I wanted to be professional, I needed to make same kinds of efforts in both classes.

Professional Development III: Practice

Reflecting on the matter of “practice” in language teaching, let us consider a model of “practice” consisting of teaching knowledge and teaching skills, and then, language knowledge and language skills. “Teaching knowledge” includes knowledge of linguistics, second language acquisition and intercultural communication. “Teaching Skills” consists of teachers’ various abilities, such as designing good lesson plans, motivating students, managing the class effectively, and knowledge of approaches to intercultural communication. Teaching knowledge and skills tend to be transferable to the teaching across a variety of languages. “Language knowledge” refers to knowledge of the structure of a particular language, knowledge of the language’s pragmatic conventions, and sociocultural practices associated with that language. “Language skills” refers to one’s language proficiency and degree of acculturation within a particular speech community (Gee, 2008). Language knowledge and language skills tend to be more language specific (see Figure 2 below).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Teaching</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge of the structure of the language and the language’s pragmatic conventions, and sociocultural practices associated with the language.</td>
<td>Knowledge about Second Language Acquisition, Linguistics, and approaches to intercultural communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>Language proficiency and degree of acculturation in the speech community.</td>
<td>Various teaching skills such as designing good lesson plans, motivating students, and managing the class effectively.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Figure 2: Elements of “Practice”

Of these four elements, I feel that teaching skills and teaching knowledge transfer from teaching one language to another quite directly. That is to say, I use the same kinds of teaching skills and knowledge in my Chinese class and my English class. I may make different instructional choices in different classes, but they are all drawn from the same repertoire of teaching skills and knowledge. On the other hand, I have different language skills and language knowledge in my two classes: in my Chinese class, I have excellent language proficiency in the target language but I have stronger language knowledge (especially regarding its structure) in my English class.

3.1 Developing My Teaching Skills

Communicative language teaching (CLT), which largely emphasizes on improving learners’ communicative competence as well as their linguistic competence (Savignon, 2001), is now held by many to be to be a more effective approach to language instruction than audio-lingual or notional-functional methods (Nunan, 1999). Therefore I wanted to make my Chinese
and my English classes as communicative as possible. In both classes I used techniques such as information gaps, collaborative learning, and simulations so that learners would feel that they were using language authentically to solve communication problems they were likely to encounter.

3.2. Teaching Culture and Other Pragmatic Skills

A goal of teaching a language is to increase students’ communicative competence for interacting with people in the target culture. Therefore, in addition to teaching the linguistic aspects of a language, culture and other pragmatic skills should also an integral part of language instruction (Peck, 1998).

I felt very competent and comfortable in bringing cultural information and pragmatic skills to my Chinese class. As someone who had grown up in China, I was aware of the culture in all its diversity--its values, beliefs, social roles, and relationships--and I easily incorporated this knowledge into my class. For example, I told students not to respond to Chinese people too explicitly or negatively—for example it is not customary for Chinese people to say “我不好(I am not fine.),” even when they are in bad mood. Similarly, one should not open gifts directly in front of their friends to avoid the possibility of showing disappointment to the giver. I also helped my students to familiarize themselves with various forms of appropriate non-verbal communication, such as the meaning of gestures and facial expressions in Chinese culture, and encouraged them to use appropriate gestures and expressions in the role plays they created. To expose them to more of the culture and the proper use of the language, I arranged a field trip
to a well known Chinese dim sum restaurant, where they ordered food and communicated with people in Chinese.

Interestingly in the ESL class, although I am a NNEST who has less cultural knowledge than NESTs about U.S. culture, I did not feel less competent incorporating culture in the class. The difference was that in the ESL class we engaged in more critical discussion looking at U.S. culture from a multicultural point of view. This was quite natural since all the students came from different cultural backgrounds and could bring their own experiences of living in the U.S. to bear on what we were learning. As a L2 learner who studied English for almost 15 years but only came to the U.S. country a short time ago, I was extremely sensitive to the differences between the English that I had learned in China and the authentic English that is used in the U.S. So, when I found an interesting cultural phenomenon, I would share it with my students. For example, I found out that the reason why cashiers were not responding to my question of “Fine, thanks. And you?” after they greeted me with “How are you today?” was because what I perceived as a question was actually intended only as a greeting by the cashiers, not a genuine question. When I shared this experience with my students they enthusiastically shared similar experiences with me. It was exhilarating. In my Chinese class, I was the font of cultural knowledge, but in the ESL class, I was simply a more seasoned member of a team of cross cultural explorers and all our discoveries had potential value.

3.3. Teaching Pronunciation

Although both of the classes were beginning classes, I taught pronunciation in different ways. In my Chinese class, I emphasized pronunciation a great deal. I started the first class by
introducing the Pinyin system (the Romanization System for Mandarin) and the four tones of Chinese. Implementing techniques from the audio-lingual method, I asked students listen and repeat. When students mispronounced a sound or tone, I would correct them immediately. Later in the semester, when students had been exposed more to the language, I asked them to record their own voices reading the texts that were covered in the class. I then listened to these audio files, took notes of each student’s pronunciation errors, and corrected them in the next class. As a native Chinese speaking teacher, I was confident in my ability to hear their pronunciation errors and correct them accordingly.

Nor as a native Chinese speaking teacher did I feel I needed to make an effort to earn students’ trust about the accuracy of my pronunciation or my judgments regarding pronunciation errors. The students had no hesitation about accepting me as their pronunciation model. They regularly asked me to evaluate their pronunciation. They accepted my corrections and tried to change their pronunciation accordingly.

In my English class, because of my lack of confidence about my pronunciation, I tried to eliminate (and if not possible, reduce) the activities that required me to teach pronunciation. I realized that I have always doubted my ability to correctly pronounce new vocabulary, even when I am completely familiar with it. In fact, I preferred to play audio files recorded by native speakers, hoping that students could succeed in imitating these “correct” models.

Doubting my ability was the result of many miscommunications that I encountered when I first entered the U.S. I can still remember the expressions on a clerk’s face when I told him I want to buy an eraser /Iˈraɪzə/. After asking me several times what I wanted, he finally
showed he understood, saying “oh, eraser /aˈrɛlsər/,” as if he were solving a difficult puzzle. I also continue to experience difficulty when calling automated switchboards using an artificial intelligence programs (AI). The avatars often respond that they do not understand me. Also, as I have worked as a receptionist in our TESOL program office and encountered situations where I needed to tell callers that they were eligible for a token gift and they heard me say that they could get a free “kitchen /ˈkɪtʃən/” instead of a “key chain /ˈkiːʃeɪn/.” I sometimes viewed such miscommunications as representing “fatal flaws” for me as a NNEST, at least in terms of teaching pronunciation.

In my ESL class, when students pronounced certain vowels or consonants incorrectly, I typically didn’t correct them, because I found the students comprehensible most of the time. I only corrected them on occasions when there was a huge gap between their pronunciation and the target pronunciation. This was quite different from my Chinese class where I had absolute confidence about pronunciation and tended to correct my students at will. Now I realize that I may have occasionally over corrected, and I try to take a second to evaluate before offering a correction. In my ESL class, students sometimes showed doubt about the accuracy of my pronunciation and my ability to provide useful feedback on their pronunciation. At times, they looked to my native speaking host instructor in the back of the class for confirmation of the “correct” pronunciation. That this reaction had an effect is clear, because whenever they looked back to my host instructor for confirmation, I did as well.

To ease students’ concerns, and to model good learning strategies, I also began regularly accessing an on-line dictionary (Oxford, 2009) with our classroom smart board (an
interactive, electronic whiteboard which can enhance instruction and learning) so that students could hear the audio files that “pronounced” each entry and confirm my pronunciation. In this way, students began to accept my feedback and I gradually earned their trust as an effective pronunciation instructor—thanks to judicious use of this tool.

3.4. Teaching Grammar

In my Chinese class, after each language presentation, (i.e., “a particular element of language, or aspect of language learning, to be focused on as the first major stage of a class period” (Crooks., & Chaudron, 2001, p.30), I would ask students to engage in many activities, such as role plays, pair-work, or games. Very rarely would I spend much time explaining grammatical rules. One justification was the principle of “focus on form,” which “entails a focus on meaning with attention to form arising out of the communicative activity” (Ellis, 2006). It is believed that “focus on form” can better assist in the acquisition of implicit knowledge than “focus on forms”; i.e., accuracy. However, another reason that I avoided explaining Chinese grammatical rules was that I was not confident in my ability to do so. I was actually shocked to see all the grammar rules listed at the back of each chapter of our textbook, and I was even tempted to disagree with some of them because they were too prescriptive. My problem as a native speaker was that I had acquired the language but never learned its underlying rules or received any education on Chinese grammar. Therefore, I was not able to teach grammatical rules well.

Inevitably, as students learned more and more Chinese and began to discover its complexity, they would ask questions on the linguistic points that were confusing to them.
When students asked me a grammar question that I found hard to answer, I would often have to resort to providing many similar sentences, hoping to explain the rule from a descriptive view; or I would need to put the question temporarily in my “parking lot” (a space on the board where the teacher notes issues to be visited later so as to not to distract from the lesson). Then before the next class, I would look up the matter in a grammar book or consult a colleague, so I could provide the students with a satisfactory answer.

In my ESL class, I felt I was much more competent and confident when answering students’ grammar questions and explaining grammar rules. I could point out students’ grammar errors in their writing almost instantly and provide explanations with many examples. Accordingly, they never hesitated to ask me grammar questions and never showed any doubt about my grammatical competency or judgment.

Moreover, as Brady (2002) points out, teaching is about empathy. Seidlhofer (1999) also suggests that NNESTs can often better pinpoint areas where students will have linguistic or non-linguistic problems than NESTs since they have gone through similar learning experiences. Because I had gone through the process of learning English, I was empathetic toward my students, which helped me anticipate the potential mistakes and share tricks that I had used to “conquer” English grammar. For example, one mistake which learners can easily make is the omission or mismatch of the subject and verb. To build students’ awareness of the problem, I required them to underline the subject and write a big dot under the verb of each sentence in the textbook. When I learned English, I used this as my strategy to learn the subject-verb agreement. I asked them to use this strategy to check their own writing. Students took to this
self-editing strategy, and gradually remembered to check the subject-verb agreement in this way even when I didn’t require it of them.

In my Chinese class, although I read grammar rules from the textbook, I didn’t have the same kind of empathy for my students. I hadn’t expected them to make so many grammar mistakes and consequently I didn’t take preventive measures to set them up for success. For example, one difference between Chinese and English sentence structure is that in Chinese there is a structure called “subject- adjective predicate.” In sentences using such structure, an adjective can function as a verb; therefore, verb like “是” (is) is not needed. For instance, to express “I am fine,” you’d only need to say “我（我）很好 (fine).” Although I mentioned this grammar rule (because I read it in the textbook), I didn’t realize how difficult it would be for the students, so I failed to provide sufficient practice and the students accordingly did not internalize the pattern.

Professional Development IV: Earning Honor and Increasing Self-esteem

I feel my efforts to grow in practice were rewarded in both classes. As Sherrie Carroll, the Director of the non-credit ESL program at Montgomery College told me, “Students love you, and you will definitely make yourself a place at Montgomery College!” In my Chinese class, I was able to see students’ respect for my professionalism in their evaluations, such as one which read, “This is my favorite class!” Such approval from my students and my supervisor increased my self-esteem and my sense of identity as a professional teacher. This validation makes me
more willing to trust myself, and helps me feel I am a professional language instructor—whether I am teaching English or Chinese.

**Conclusion**

Overall, my experience as a NNEST and NCST has made me realize that one’s first language only plays a small role in the professional teaching competence. As Taylor (2008) has suggested through her model of professional competence, a teacher’s teaching competence should be judged in three areas: practice, relationship, and commitment (not only on practice, which has often been the case traditionally). These areas of competence should be well balanced. Similarly, criteria for determining whether a language teacher is a “professional” or not should also follow models such as Taylor’s, which look at the “whole teacher” not just certain elements of practice.

There are a number of reasons for giving priority to overall professional competence rather than focusing only on a teacher’s native language. First of all, non-native language speaking teachers should be reminded that language proficiency is only part of their overall competence. Their commitment to the profession, their relationships with students and other stakeholders, and other elements of practice are crucial to defining the truly competent teacher.

Second, by working on the other aspects of professionalism (commitment, relationship, and teaching skills), non-native language speaking teachers can contextualize language proficiency in terms of other strengths and skills. However, this does not mean NNEST have no obligation to continue to improve their English (Braine, 2003), especially in regards to pronunciation and cultural knowledge. Just as native English speaking teachers need to make
an effort to learn the grammar rules of the own language and help their students develop effective learning strategies, so too do non-native English speaking teachers need to work on aspects of “practice” such as pronunciation and knowledge of idioms.

Third, in terms of hiring decisions, evaluation of the “relationship” and “commitment” should be considered as important as evaluating “practice.” Most often, aspects of “practice” (the ability to use latest teaching methodology, to manage the class, and to make students engaged and involved etc.) are the only focus in teacher evaluations (Taylor, 2008). This exclusive focus on practice is also seen in the Praxis II teacher licensure and certification assessment series description, which explicitly states that “Praxis II tests measure general and subject-specific knowledge and teaching skills” (Educational Testing Services, 2009). Neglecting the other two elements of professionalism results in an incomplete assessment of teaching competence and therefore, one that is invalid. This may particularly frustrate NNESTs, who feel that they are treated like a “second class teachers” because the other talents that they bring to instruction remain ignored while undue attention is paid to their command of English. Such “invisible barriers” (Braine, 1998) may cause employers to reject competent, qualified NNEST teachers solely on their nonnativeness (Mahboob, et al., 2004).

Fourth, perhaps language teacher training programs need focus more on including training that develops competencies related to the headings of “relationship” and “commitment,” such as interpersonal skills and strategies for developing good student rapport.

Last but not least, language teacher training programs should continue to develop ways to address different training needs for native speakers and non-native speaking teachers, as
they have needs for different kinds of knowledge. For NNESTs, courses might be better designed to focus on improving their English proficiency and fluency, including standard pronunciation, idioms, and other nuances of language, as well as courses aiming to develop their cultural awareness; whereas course work for native speaking teachers might emphasize on improving explicit grammar knowledge and techniques for explaining it. (Mahboob, forthcoming).
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