

***ARE NATIVE SPEAKERS “GOOD” LANGUAGE INSTRUCTORS? A CASE STUDY
OF UNTRAINED ESL TUTORS***

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Abstract

Concerns are increasing in the field of ESL teaching over the growth of inexperienced English native speakers seeking to teach, as evidenced by recent research (Samimy and Brutt-Griffler 1999; Maum 2002). There are misconceptions that one must be a native speaker in order to teach a language. The present case study investigated the teaching performance and concerns of the inexperienced Native English Teachers (NETs). Specifically, the study looks closely into: (a) the teaching behaviors of the untrained NETs; (b) the problems the untrained NETs face in teaching; and (c) the self-perceptions of the untrained NETs towards their teaching. Data was collected through observations, teachers' reflective journals, and interviews. The findings revealed: (a) the untrained NETs tended to use authentic materials versus traditional grammar textbooks and that most of them were very creative in lesson plans; (b) the untrained NETs were concerned about the length of the class and being incapable of explaining grammar and vocabulary; and (c) the confidence level of the untrained NETs in teaching gained immensely in a short period of time. These findings are important because it provides valuable insights to ESL trainers about the kinds of training pre-service NETs need. It also shows that NETs can be very effective if they have enough experience and proper training.

Key Words: *ESL, Native Speaking Teachers, Non-Native Speaking Teachers, Training, Teachers' Perceptions.*

1. Introduction

The issue of learners' preference of native English teachers (NET) and non-native English teachers (NNET) has become a popular topic in the field of language teaching. It is not uncommon to hear English students express that they prefer being taught by NETs, whether or not they are qualified in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It is not rare for us to hear some NSs with different backgrounds and in different study areas say that they will go teach English to make money when they travel overseas. In other words, they treat English teaching as a tool for them to receive money instead of treating it as a profession.

A large number of qualified ESL/EFL teachers throughout the world are NNSs. Despite this fact, NETs are in greater demand than well-trained NNETs by many school administrators. It is easier for untrained NSs to be hired to teach ESL/EFL than trained and experienced NNETs.

Although it is true that NSs have the ear to hear what sounds good or bad, are they skillful/successful ESL teachers? What are the self-perceptions of untrained NETs? Very few studies have investigated the effectiveness and the perceptions of NETs who lack professional training. The study, using a case study design, will focus on how inexperienced NETs teach ESL lessons, how they think about their teaching and the problems they face in their teaching.

2. Background

NSs are considered to be ideal language teachers (Beardsmore 1993; Genesee 1987). One of the tenets used in the Commonwealth conference on the Teaching of English as a Second Language held in Makarere, Uganda in 1961 was, "the ideal teacher

of English is a native speaker.” Maum (2002) disagrees with this tenet and argues that “people do not become qualified to teach English merely because it is their mother tongue.” Nonetheless, the demand for having NETs, both trained and untrained, to teach students, parents, and school administrators remains high.

Many employers of private language centers and public school principles in non-English speaking countries, especially in Asia, have begun hiring NETs to teach at their centers or schools. These administrators often place emphasis on having NETs as their strong point. Some NNETs in Hong Kong indicated in a study conducted by Walker (2001) that they found it insulting to their professionalism that the Hong Kong government hired NETs from overseas to teach in Hong Kong. Walker (2001) concluded that it achieves economic and educational purposes only if NETs contribute differently than the NNETs. It is very easy for one to find many English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) job advertisements, where one of the requirements listed is being a native speaker. To show the world’s strong preference for NETs, Moussu (2006) reports that in a quick visit of a well-known international ESL website, she found the majority of the ESL jobs listed on the job board were offered to NETs only. These countries where NETs were wanted were in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, South America, as well as North America.

A body of research (e.g. Lee 2000; Cheung 2002; Liang 2002; Mahboob 2004; Moussu and Braine 2006) has focused on students’ perspectives of NETs, and NNETs. The study of Cheung (2002) indicated that Hong Kong university students made good comments on NETs’ English proficiency, knowledge of the English speaking cultures, and skills in using English effectively. The subjects agreed that NNETs are good at

grammar, have understanding towards their students as second language learners, and have common culture knowledge with the them. Similar to the finding of Cheung (2002), Mahboob (2004) shows that students view the speaking ability, lexical and culture knowledge as the strengths of NETs. However, in Walker's study (2001), NETs see their responsibility of being cultural consultants to be less important as language teachers. Instead, they see their teaching roles as improving students' oral skills.

Moussu (2006) reports from the findings of Braine (1999), Liu (1999), and Graddol (2006) that a large number of qualified ESL/EFL teachers throughout the world are NNSs. Despite this fact, NETs are in greater demand than well-trained NNETs by many school administrators. It is easier for untrained NSs to be hired to teach ESL/EFL than trained and experienced NNETs. Summarized from a few research studies, Maum (2002) writes:

native English speakers without teaching qualifications are more likely to be hired as ESL teachers than qualified and experienced NNETs, especially outside the United States.

Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999) mention that many NSs enter the profession of teaching ESL/EFL simply because they have superior English competency. However, as Lasagabaster and Sierra (2002) express, language teaching requires a great deal of training and practice and it is a difficult job to describe one's native language. Bae (2007) reports in a news article about problems with hiring not serious foreigners teaching English in South Korea. Bae reports “[a]ccoring to the ministry, 62 foreign teachers in 2005 and 65 in 2006 broke their contracts with schools and went back to their countries in mid semester” (pp. 1). Not being serious about one's teaching interrupts students' learning. In fact, the role of English teachers is not just to provide students with the

knowledge of the language but serves as a conjunction – no comma needed but they also help students understand the language tasks and motivates them in the process. Likewise, English competence is not the only factor that makes for an effective teacher experience, motivation and professional training are equally important. To be an effective teacher is more than just being a NS (Kao 2007). As indicated by Maum (2002b), NSs of English without ESL training are hired more frequently than well-trained NNETs but NNETs have their advantages in the profession. As such, she emphasizes that both NETs and NNETs need qualification to enter the profession.

It is very important to understand inexperienced teachers' perceptions of their teaching. Mok (1994) conducted a case study of experienced and inexperienced ESL teachers to find out their major concerns and perceptions. The inexperienced NETs in the study had concerns about meeting students' needs, lesson plans and teaching materials. Mok (1994) concluded that both experienced and inexperienced teachers are influenced by their own experience as learners and teachers, regardless of what research says. Similar to the study of Mok, Reves and Medgyes (1994) administered a questionnaire to ESL/EFL teachers in ten different countries to study their views on the differences between the teaching of NETs and NNETs. These teachers indicated several points about NETs' teaching behaviors: 1) NETs are thought to be less prepared and show less empathy towards students' language struggles; 2) NETs generally are not familiar with how languages are learned; 3) NETs tend to be more successful with advanced learners.

Researchers have also examined the differences between experienced and inexperienced teachers' teaching behaviors. Pica and Long (1986) compared experienced and inexperienced ESL teachers in their ability to modify input and conversation in

teaching. They looked at characteristics such as the teachers' lesson structures, self-repetitions, confirmation checks, and clarification requests. Results from this study showed that there were many similarities between the experienced and inexperienced teachers in their teaching behaviours and strategies. However, the experienced teachers were more skillful in using the target language.

Despite the fact that inexperienced teachers were included in the study, these inexperienced teachers were from a master's degree program in ESL. Very few studies have looked into detail at how NETs without foreign language teacher training teach lessons and the problems they face during lesson planning and teaching.

3. The Present Study

Purpose

This study was conducted using a case study design. The primary purpose of this case study was to investigate how the inexperienced NETs conducted language lessons and what they did to prepare for the lessons. The secondary purpose was to look into what problems the inexperienced NETs faced in their teaching and their perspectives of their own teaching.

4. Research Questions

1. How do the untrained native English speaking tutors teach their tutees?
2. What problems do the untrained native English speaking tutors face in their teaching?
3. How do the untrained native English speaking tutors view their own teaching?

5. Methods

Participants

There were eight participants in the present study. They had to fulfill three criteria: be native speakers of English, have no prior language teaching experience and have no former language teaching training. The participants were undergraduate students at a university in West Texas. They were enrolled in an HONS course entitled: "Language, Race, and Equality" and an ENGL course entitled: "ESL Service-Learning Opportunity". Both groups met together with one professor. One of the requirements of the course was for them to tutor ESL to the community three hours a week. This ESL program was a free service program organized by the university and a literacy group in the community. Tutors met 80 - 90 minutes weekly with the professor, they tutored twice weekly (3 hours total) and they completed readings and assignments. A three-hour pre-service "boot camp" for intensive training in language pedagogy, phonology and communicative language teaching was provided three days prior to the first day of tutoring. As a researcher, I was the trainer of the pre-service "boot camp", as well as the supervisor of the participants.

Materials

The unstructured participant observations were carried out and paper and a pen were used by me, whose role was to take in-class observation notes.

A semi-structured interview with the tutors was conducted individually. Each tutor was asked a set of predetermined questions (See Appendix A), with added questions for clarification. With the permission of the participants, a digital recorder was used to record the participants' responses during the interview.

Procedures

The ESL class met twice a week for ninety minutes each time. The tutors did not

know who their students would be prior to the first lesson. They had been asked to write about their expectations and their concerns about tutoring ESL in a reflective journal before their first lesson. Three observations of the tutors' teaching were conducted during the semester and field notes were taken during the observations. I wrote down things that I saw and heard between the tutors and the students. The first observation was conducted on the second week of the class and the second and third observations were carried out once a month throughout the semester. I was also the supervisor who usually provided feedback and advice to the tutors about their teaching. However, during the observations, my role was a participant observer. I quietly sat at the back of each tutor's group and offered help to the tutors only when assistance, such as word explanation to the students and teaching ideas, was necessary. The reason why I chose to observe the participants quietly was because I did not want to affect the results of the teaching behaviors of the tutors. The tutors were also asked to write a reflective journal about what they did to prepare for the lesson, what techniques and strategies they used in the lesson, the problems that they faced in their teaching, as well as their feelings about their teaching, after each lesson. The tutors wrote the journals with a set of guided questions (See Appendix B). At the end of the semester, the tutors were interviewed by me about the tutors' perspectives of their own teaching.

6. Analysis

Data was analyzed using a qualitative coding method. It was read repeatedly and common themes were created. The data was also compared with the tutors' reflective journals. To ensure the validity of the interview and the interpretations of the data, the interview data was compared with the tutors' reflective journals. Finally, the analyzed

results along with the interview data, observation field notes and tutors' reflective journals were given to the ESL service program director to examine.

7. Findings

Teaching Behaviors of the Untrained Tutors

Five trends were developed based on the observations, tutors' reflective journals and interviews. They were 1) kind of materials used 2) lack of knowledge about language 3) degree of structure in the lessons planned by tutors 4) inability to consistently integrate and interact with all students in tutor sessions and 5) how tutors handled students' questions.

Kinds of materials used: The tutors used both traditional and authentic materials. The traditional materials included grammar worksheets, dictionaries and ESL pronunciation textbooks. Authentic materials included advertisements from grocery stores, newspapers, short stories, comic books, games, music, movies, flash cards and pictures. Two tutors mainly focused their lessons on grammar and pronunciation and used traditional materials to work on those areas with their students. The other six tutors used authentic materials in their lessons. They taught vocabulary using the pictures in the advertisements and flash cards. They opened up conversations using different games and newspapers. One tutor liked to watch movies and he used them to teach culture, idioms and vocabulary. A few students wanted to work on reading and their tutors used novels and newspapers to help their students reach the goal. One tutor used music in a few lessons to work on listening skills with her students. The tutors used dictionaries when there were words they did not know how to explain. When they used the dictionary, they simply read the definitions directly from it.

Lack of knowledge about language: Tutors did not understand some language terms, such as phonology and did not know how to explain words and grammar. For instance, one tutor asked the student if they should talk about school. The student responded with, “Just talk about anything to help me with my pronunciation and intonation.” The tutor did not understand what intonation was. She opened a pronunciation textbook in the classroom, reading some words in a randomly picked chapter and the student repeated after the tutor. Then she flipped through the book and looked for the chapter on intonation and read the sentences to the student. Another example that shows tutors lack knowledge of their native language is that one tutor asked her students to read some passages and look for unfamiliar words. When the students asked the tutor a word they didn’t understand, the tutor had no idea how to explain it. She walked to the bookshelf and found a dictionary. Then she said, ‘here is the definition’ and let students copy down the definition.

Degree of structure in the lesson planned by tutors: Some tutors did not have a clear lesson plan. They talked about random things in their lessons. For example, a tutor went over each thing in an advertisement. When she finished saying each item in English, she immediately asked her student to translate a comic book into Spanish. After translating the book, she went back to the advertisement to talk about some pictures. When she finished talking about the pictures, she asked the students to change some sentences into past tense.

There are some examples that show certain tutors who have a better lesson structure. A couple of tutors combined language instruction and activities in a lesson. They called the first half of their lessons ‘traditional teaching’ and the second half of the class ‘activity time’. During the traditional teaching time, a tutor focused on vocabulary through reading

a novel and watched a DVD with discussions in the second half of the class. Another tutor worked on grammar and sentence structure through grammar worksheets during her traditional teaching and played games with the students during activity time.

Inability to consistently integrate and interact with all students in tutor session: Two points were observed under this trend. First, tutors were not able to integrate students in their teaching. For example, one tutor had two students. She asked both of the students to take turns reading each page in a story book out loud. She corrected their pronunciation by repeating the words in the correct way. While one student was reading, the other did not get to see the words because there was only one book and the students were not sitting next to each other. Second, a couple of tutors had different students in a group learn different things in the same lesson. For example, one tutor had two intermediate level students. Instead of teaching the same thing to both of her students, she asked one student to do word puzzles and the other did grammar exercises. When the students finished their individual task, she gave them another task of the same kind.

How tutors handled students' questions: The tutors answered the students' questions in three different ways. First, a few tutors relied on dictionaries when explaining new words to students. For example, one student asked her tutor the meaning of the word 'annoying'. The tutor did not know how to explain it and opened a dictionary and read the definition directly without further explanation. Second, two other tutors looked for answers from the ESL textbooks when there were words they did not know. For instance, a tutor did not know what intonation was, so she opened a pronunciation textbook in the classroom to look for a chapter on intonation. Third, a few tutors asked for the direct translation of the students' native languages from other tutors and I. For instance, one student did not

understand the word ‘snow’. The tutor asked me who spoke the student’s native language to translate the word for her.

The tutors’ teaching behaviours provide strong evidence that language teachers, even if they speak the language natively, should have language teacher training.

Problems Faced by the Tutors

The majority of the tutors voiced that the length of the class period was too long for them to fill with activities. Below are the excerpts from the tutors’ journals:

T1: *‘I am a little concerned about the length of the tutoring sessions. 90 minutes at a time is hard to fill with activities. I think I will go to the library and get some books with more ideas.’*

T2: *‘Even after getting books from the library, downloading teaching handouts from the internet, and purchasing interactive games, I am still concerned with filling the entire 90 minute time slot.’*

In other words, the tutors did not know what else to teach and do with the students besides doing different activities to fill the class time.

Other concerns expressed by the tutors included the lack of ability to explain grammar and to answer ‘why’ questions, and lack of materials. A few tutors expressed that they could speak English fluently but did not know how to explain it. They realized that their students liked to ask them ‘why’ and the tutors felt frustrated when they did not know how to answer the students. One tutor wrote in his journal:

It is at times frustrating when you run out of ideas of how to explain something....I don’t know grammar very well. I am not good at dictionary definition.

As for teaching materials, four tutors expressed that it was difficult for them to

figure out what to teach without having a textbook to follow. They had to look for materials on the internet or purchase some games to teach their students.

Three tutors expressed in the interview that they wished they could have more training on teaching ideas and grammar before the first day of class. Although they had an intensive training session before they started to tutor, they still felt very lost because they did not know what to do with their students. However, two of them claimed that their comfort zone had increased slightly as they had more experience.

Tutors' Attitudes about Their Teaching

Almost all of the participants changed from not confident at all to very confident in teaching ESL and their level of confidence depended on the types of activities they discovered. For example, one tutor expressed,

'In the beginning, I felt like we didn't have very much training as far as tutoring techniques. We just learned about different kinds of sounds.'

This tutor felt much more confident at the end of the semester because she had discovered her own techniques for tutoring and those techniques were different activities that she had found online. Another tutor changed from not very confident to much more confident in her own teaching in one semester of ESL teaching experience. She expressed in the interview:

In the beginning, I spent a lot of time being worried about not being able to keep my students engaged, prepare different things, so when one thing wouldn't work out, I still had other back up....I think I am much confident now.... I have an idea of what my students like to do and don't like. I also know what helps my students, and what kinds of things I should probably just skip over.

Their responses show that the level of confidence depends on the types of activities they found and the amount of experience they have in teaching.

The majority of the tutors in the present study believed that their strength as an ESL teacher was being friendly and open minded. When expressing what they thought their strength to be, the tutors said:

T1: *'I think that I am very open, friendly and nice. I just make people very comfortable.'*

T2: *'I think I'm very friendly and open...so that my students feel comfortable in asking me questions.'*

None of the tutors mentioned that having training on how to teach and how languages are learned would be necessary. Also, none of them stated that being a native speaker of English was an advantage.

As for tutors' perceptions of their weaknesses in teaching ESL, a common response of what the tutors thought they lacked as an ESL teacher was not being able to explain grammar and vocabulary well. The tutor expressed:

T1: *'I don't give enough clear definition when I explain things and I need to ask someone else to explain it with me.'*

T2: *'I lack the general knowledge of vocabulary and grammar.'*

In other words, what was observed as the tutors' problems in teaching matched the tutors' responses of what they viewed as their weaknesses.

To summarize the observations and the tutors' responses, the tutors in the present study used a lot of authentic materials in their lessons; several of them prepared and created a lot of different activities for their students. Therefore, we should not make a generalization that all NETs are less prepared. However, most of the tutors did their lesson plans according to what kinds of activities they found. They filled the class time

with different activities without having a clear goal of how languages are taught. Also, the tutors in this study generally had a hard time explaining the language to the students.

8. Significance of the Study

The findings of the present study are important because they reveal that not all untrained teachers teach in the same way. Some of them were very creative in terms of lesson plans and material usage. However, ESL teachers or tutors need proper training to teach their native language. The findings also give some insights to the ESL trainers about the kinds of preparations the pre-service ESL teachers may need.

9. Limitations of the Study and Future Research Suggestions

There are a few limitations in the present study. First, there were only eight participants. Their teaching behaviors, problems and perceptions may not represent the majority of untrained NETs. Therefore, more participants are needed for future research. Second, the tutors in this study only taught one semester. We cannot see what changes they would have made if they had continued teaching. Thus, a longitudinal study is needed to see the changes in teaching behaviours, problems and perceptions of the untrained ESL teachers over time. Third, the classes that the tutors taught were free and unstructured; the students could come and go freely. In other words, the tutors were not sure who would attend the class and when they would have new students; that may have affected how they planned their lessons. Hence, students from a regular classroom are needed for future research.

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Appendices

Appendix A Interview Questions

- 1) Why did you choose to tutor ESL?
- 2) How confident were you in teaching ESL in the beginning?
- 3) How confident are you now in teaching ESL?
- 4) What are the things you enjoy the most about tutoring?
- 5) What teaching techniques do you usually use?
- 6) What are the problems, frustrations you have had about tutoring?
- 7) What changes have you seen/noticed in yourself about teaching ESL?
- 8) What do you think are your strengths in being an ESL tutor/teacher?
- 9) What do you think you lack in being an ESL tutor/teacher?
- 10) What, in your opinion, is the most effective way to teach ESL students? Why?
- 11) What, in your opinion, is not an effective way to teach ESL student? Why?
- 12) What do you think you need more in order to be a better ESL teacher?
- 13) What do you think a person should have or need to be an ESL teacher?
- 14) Would you hope to continue teaching/tutor ESL in the future? Why?

Appendix B Guided Questions for Tutors' Reflective Journals

1. What did you do to prepare for your lesson?
2. What teaching materials did you use?
3. What did you teach your students?
4. How did you teach them?
5. What problems did you face?
6. How did you feel about your teaching?

About the Author

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