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The Non-Native English Teacher: Making the most out of your academic background

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English Issues in teaching, demanding students to acquire "practical English," have been discussed for decades in Japan. Given the students' aim to increase communicative competence, the focus has been placed more on improving speaking and listening skills rather than on grammar-translation. Facing the need in English classes in all academic institutions, especially at university level however, the teachers' background seems not to have been much changed. In recent decades, the number of teachers who are native speakers of English (NSE) has increased, and there is a strong preference for teachers with a background in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), TESL (Teaching English as Second Language), or TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language).

In practice, however, many teachers are non-native speakers of English (NNSE) with a background in literature and not been trained as second language educators. Although most of them aspire to teach the subjects related to their major, demand is low. Consequently, many are required to teach English. However, some schools avoid hiring such candidates as they lack the skills and motivation on second language teaching. Then, do NNSE teachers who do not have a background in second language education have a future?

If foreign-language teaching is regarded as the transmission of skills in order to prepare for exams, the argument would hold. However, I feel language acquisition is a part of learning culture, art, history, and ideas which ultimately increases learner's motivation. In

that case, NNSE teachers with a background in literature are not disadvantaged. They must, however, make the most of their educational backgrounds. Besides the obvious fact that NNSE teachers have gone through the experience of learning English as a second or foreign language, their literature studies have made them aware of such cultural issues as race and gender, or history and thought. They also often share the cultural background of students. In this essay, I will explore the possibilities and/or advantages of NNSE teachers particularly those with a background in literature. First, I will discuss the potential of NNSE teachers as the best candidates for providing students an effective language learning model through introducing Medgyes's study. Focusing on the characteristics of NNSE teachers, I will explore advantages they offer with regard to English education. Next, I will examine literature as authentic material for language classes. If the significance of using literature in our language classes is recognized, a teacher with literature background is able to play a significant role in the setting.

Effective learning model.

Medgyes (1994) indicates that there are two types of models teachers can serve for students: a language model and a learner model. While it is generally accepted that acquiring native speakers' proficiency is impossible for most of non-native teachers, it is also accepted that non-native teachers can be "perfect learner models" (53). Medgyes also suggests that we have to be successful language learners to become successful language teachers. Accordingly, all NNSE teachers, having experienced the process of acquiring at least one foreign language, have potential to be an excellent learner models in English learning. Although ability in English should be varies among them, but I believe the possibility to become a good learning model is equally given to them making use of their educational backgrounds.

However, a critical issue presents two speaker and skills. The writer or not proficiency in terms of process (1999) points be the amount without his/ someone speaks presents the Joseph Conrad by Virginia Woolf

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However, the assessment of teachers' English abilities could prove a critical issue, and it is difficult to assess. As an example, Medgyes presents two NNSE teachers: Mr. Antoglio, a more fluent English speaker and Ms. Lin, who has rather poorly developed speaking skills. The question proposed is whether Mr. Antoglio is a better writer or not (51). What he implies here is that it is hard to measure proficiency in English by simply looking at one's speaking ability. In terms of proficiency, we tend to focus on speaking ability. Cook (1999) points out that the measure of success in L2 learning tends to be the amount of foreign accent: the degree to which someone speaks without his/her 'native language accent' and the degree to which someone speaks English with a native accent (195). She then presents the unreasonable assessment through mentioning a case of Joseph Conrad, stamped as "a foreigner, talking only broken English" by Virginia Woolf despite his excellent English writings.

In addition, the difference in his/her English education background makes the issue more complex. For example, let's suppose that Mr. Antoglio exceeds in all four skills. If, however, he spends one month in England every summer while Ms. Lin has never been to English speaking countries, which person can provide a better learner model for the students who have never been to a foreign country? It seems difficult to answer the question. Mr. Antoglio would be able to teach the students drawing from his experience in England, which could inspire students' interest in a new culture, while Ms. Lin would tell the students her experience and method in learning English without having traveled abroad (i.e. how she has improved her listening, speaking or writing ability using materials that she could access while in her own country).

I am certain that we can find similar stories among NNSE teachers in Japan. Some Japanese teachers who have had opportunities to study abroad might be more fluent speakers than the others who have not, acquiring the language skills instead in Japan. Again, how can

we compare these teachers and decide which one is a good learner providing a better model in language learning? In fact, most of the students in a classroom have never been to foreign countries, or if they have, just a week or so for sightseeing. Besides, how many of them are fortunate enough to have the opportunity to study abroad or stay about a month in an English speaking country every summer like Mr. Antoglio? As her background is closer to that of the students, Ms. Lin might be able to provide a better learning model. A comparable educational experience seems to be the strongest advantage for teachers who are non-native speakers. I will discuss this in greater detail later.

Some students, however, might complain about or disapprove teachers' Japanese accent. This is largely based on stereotypes created by the media, which promote the image that only white people can speak "proper English." Such images altogether dismiss those from other backgrounds who are also NSEs (e.g. Barbadians), as well as all NNSEs. In addition, such stereotypical images disregard the fact that the primary goal of communication is to speak in ways others can understand. While people do have to speak the words in ways others understand, we do not have to pronounce the words as native speakers do. Being able to make oneself understood is an issue of word choice, not accent. NNSE teachers should not be expected to sound "native." Cook's article argues the prominence of the native speakers in language teaching should create an "unattainable goal for L2 users" (185). Throughout her article, she suggests that we look at L2 users in their own right as "genuine L2 users, not as imitation native speakers" or failures to become native speakers (195).

For this reason, NNSE teachers should not be expected to pronounce words exactly as native speakers do. On the contrary, variations in accents should be encouraged and accepted. Just as in Japanese language, people from Aomori sound different from people

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in Kyushu, NSEs from England and South Africa sound different.¹ People are to be able to speak and communicate through English with various accents, which NNSE teachers can be a perfect model in front of students. They do not have to be ashamed of the accent they have, or rather should be proud of it since it shows the fact that the person knows more than one culture. This should lead the next issue, bicultural and bilingual background of non-native English speaking teachers.

Bicultural and bilingual background.

Llurda (2004) advocates describing English as a "lingua franca" and focuses on the role of NNSE teachers. The term is used as part of the concept that English is now spoken by more people as an L2 than as a native language. Consequently, English is no longer exclusively owned by native-speaking communities. An extension of this idea in the context of English language education is that NNSE teachers do not have to be "ambassadors" of either British or American stereotypical values, but can serve as "mediators" between the learners' own culture and that of the English-speaking countries (319). This means that local issues could be set into materials in a class.

McKay (2000) suggests the need to draw on the previous knowledge of the language learner through exploiting one's own knowledge of his/her own language and culture, recommending using learners' own cultural issues as materials (317). In his study, Llurda (2004) points out that NNSE teachers are more likely to use instructional materials and activities incorporating with local issues as well as international one although the content could be varies from teacher to teacher. He defines NNSE as the ones who would be in

1 This raises the issue of what "is" a native speaker, an issue that has been widely debated.

optimal positions to bring the students into the world of "English as an International Language." This is because those teachers who have access to two or more cultures should have the flexibility in combining the worldwide materials into the local settings. For example, racial discrimination is often appeared as one of the topics in the class. We know as knowledge that how African American, Latinos, and Asian American have been discriminated in the U.S. However, I would say most of Japanese are not sensitive for the racial issues. This is because most of people in Japan have grown up without experiencing as the victim of discrimination and do not notice the issues existing even in their own country. Therefore, in this context, teachers can shift the attention to students' own countries to make the issue more personal. We could ask them to do research on Korean Japanese, Chinese Japanese, or Brazilian Japanese, using literal material in any language. Besides, the issue of the inconveniences for foreigners in Japan (e. g. house-hunting) could be a good research topic to develop awareness of racial discrimination. We could then go back to the original material, the racial issues in the English speaking countries. This time, we can also use literature to develop our imagination. We cannot experience everything but can expand one's imagination through reading. In general, it is assumed that teachers with literature background are supposed to be better readers, or even if that is not the case, they must have read more number of books than teachers without a background in literature. They are to be able to choose suitable books for discussion or recommend further materials concerning the issue. Moreover, in order to improve the students' knowledge, information in any languages should be allowed to use. Through doing these activities, students and teachers are forced to expose into the bicultural and multicultural perspectives.

In addition to these bi/multi cultural perspectives, being bilingual is another advantage for NNSE teachers. Llurda (2004) suggests that

those teachers must be end (318). In this process, we languages and more than 1 experience of switching back the target one, they must themselves or understanding applies to the relationship to one. As has already been "ambassadors" of the coordinator between two cultures. However, process of acculturation: the cultural values and may exist who has had a similar experience advise learners by showing We don't have to decide whether multi-faced reality and give acquisition of new language and cultural status quo or necessary for the learners, linguistically, culturally, an international language we speaking or mono-cultural community in which NNSE guiding their students.

The characteristics of non-

Medgyes also examines teachers with regard to various content, language competence approach, NSE teachers tend NNSE teachers seem to take

those teachers must be endowed with the privilege of bilingualism (318). In this process, we may go back and forth between the two languages and more than two cultures. Because of the on-going experience of switching back and forth from their own language to the target one, they must acquire the high ability of expressing themselves or understanding things in different languages. This also applies to the relationship between one's own culture and the target one. As has already been stated, the teachers do not have to be "ambassadors" of the foreign language and culture but to a coordinator between two cultures giving students opportunity to learn another culture. However, language learning is connected to the process of acculturation: therefore, the learners surely face the new cultural values and may experience a conflict. Again, as a person who has had a similar experience, as NNSE teacher can comfort and advise learners by showing them culturally comparable examples. We don't have to decide which value is better or not, but present the multi-faced reality and give the learner opportunity to think. The acquisition of new language may lead to a threat to existing linguistic and cultural status quo of the student. However, this threat is necessary for the learners, including teachers themselves, to improve linguistically, culturally, and humanly. In the ideal English as an international language world, there is no monolingual English speaking or mono-cultural society but multilingual and multicultural community in which NNSE teachers can play a role as a member guiding their students.

The characteristics of non-native English speaking teachers

Medgyes also examines the differences between NSE and NNSE teachers with regard to various issues, including didactic approach, content, language competence, stress etc. As regards didactic approach, NSE teachers tend to use student-centered approach while NNSE teachers seem to take a teacher centered approach focusing

on grammar, having more explanations in the mother tongue with more translations exercises and more error-corrections (20-1). In examining the difference, he does not criticize NNSE teachers but to challenge the current over-preference of learner-centeredness and points out the importance of error-corrections. While I will refrain from making value judgement in this regard, this might prompt us a question whether the students are comfortable in a student-centered or teacher-centered environment. However, my experience as both a teacher and a student has shown me that if the students have to lead the class or debate by their own, they easily become lost since critical thinking or discussion skills have yet to be implemented properly in secondary education program. Consequently, proper instructions that should show and lead the student to create a student-centered classroom environment are necessary.

More importantly, as mentioned above, the biggest advantage of NNSE teachers is that they share a similar educational experience with students, which should result in a better understanding of the difficulties or stress experienced by students in learning English. Most of the students have had grammar and translation centered English education. Therefore, NNSE teachers who had similar educational background must know how the students can put those skills acquired in junior/ high school into a practical situation much better than NSE teachers who may not be familiar with the methodology that is well understood by students. My argument here is that NNSEs have the potential to be more effective teachers as they understand the methodology used previously and the students, which enables NNSEs to draw the best from both.

The argument above leads us the word, empathy that could be one of the most characteristics of the successful teacher. In the study, Medgyes introduces us Bowers' idea of "hot education" and "cold education" (64). Hot education represents equal roles in a classroom; two-way interaction, problem solving, simulation activities, and so

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on, which are classified as learner-centeredness. On the other hand, cold education includes teacher control, one-way interaction, etc. While the former has obviously been supported, given the general view of NNSE teachers, the latter may be a more appropriate label. However, it is difficult for teachers to be "hot" unless they are able to understand students' needs, feelings, or frustration. For this reason, it is highly possible that NNSEs who have been through similar English education can provide "hot education" presenting themselves as effective learning models. Some claim that NNSE teachers will be eternal learners as they can never "hit the mark." While potentially true, I do not take offence at this remark; rather, I view it as an opportunity and an advantage. While NNSE teachers may not be able to serve as language models, they make ideal learning models, presenting themselves to the students as perpetual learners.

Literature as authentic material

Moskowitz (1996) argues that "affective education is effective education." How can we be affective unless we are interested in what we are doing? Many NNSE teachers with a background in literature often feel that their academic background has little bearing on their current work and tend not to show their interest in teaching English. However, it is better to find some connection between literature and language teaching for the sake of both teachers and students. In fact, I would argue that a background in literature represents an advantage for NNSE teachers.

As mentioned previously, language education should not be limited solely to promoting the acquisition of skills, but also extend to gaining knowledge about other disciplines such as history, politics, or art for which literature could serve as authentic material. Works of literature have been regarded as a powerful medium for both, intra and intercultural growth. Not only can they transcend time and place, they may also serve as a bridge between students and their immediate

culture and enable them to participate in its development.² For example, in countries such as the US where multicultural education has been promoted, pre-service teachers are likely to be asked and be exposed to perspectives different from their own (Ryan and Dixon, 175). This means that they are asked to read literature by and/or about "other" groups, which should help them feel what it's like to be "others" (176). Actually, making an effort to understand others should be an essential approach in today's internationalized world.

In terms of literature, we may regard it as writing that preeminently reflects in depth and quality of some aspects in human experience, illuminating them from the perspective of a sensitive and intelligent observer. McKay (1982) asserts that literature that is selected for both thematic relevance and linguistic accessibility can motivate students to read as well as provide "an ideal vehicle for illustrating language use and introducing cultural assumptions." She recommends the use of literature to encourage aesthetic reading that is, reading that establishes a personal relationship between a reader and text (322). Here, as Boyd (2006) and others point out, the choice of using literature and how we assess its value are key issues. Some may argue that only literature written by authors of minority groups could be used, or that this only applies to modern literature. However, as we know, almost all of English or American literature address social problems, such as race, gender, or class, which should have some connection with a present society. It is for this reason that I believe both pieces written by an author of majority group or "classics" can serve as good materials as well.

For example, Neil (2005) and Royster (2005) present how they could introduce awareness of modern racial issues as part of the study of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Beginning with a critical analysis of race

2 Vardell, Hadaway, and Young (2006); Ernest-Slavit, Moor and Maloney (2002); McCafferty (2002); Devine (1984)

in *Othello*, Neil briefly discusses the history of racism and goes on to discuss the 1994 O.J. Simpson scandal. As many of us know, O.J. Simpson, an African American former football star and sports broadcaster was arrested for the murder of his caucasian wife. Neil reminds us how journalists across the country immediately drew comparisons between O.J. Simpson and Othello. In general, Othello syndrome, named by the English psychiatrist John Todd (1914-1987) has been defined as the delusion of infidelity of a spouse or partner. The Othello syndrome affects males and, less often, females. It is characterized by "recurrent accusation of infidelity, search for evidence, repeated interrogation of the partner, tests of their partner's fidelity, and sometime stalking. The syndrome may appear by itself or in the course of paranoid schizophrenia, alcoholism, or cocaine addiction" (Medical net com). Stated in this way it has nothing to do with race, but, as O.J. happens to be African American and his wife Caucasian, the media immediately identified and emphasized the similarities with Othello.

Meanwhile, Royster suggests some questions we can use in the class using *Othello*: "How can people of color navigate our public and private landscapes; how do all of us in this society live authentic lives despite the scripts of racism; how do we face our fears and self doubt; what happens when we confront institutional forms of racism?"(55). She points out that the story of Othello has been retold as a story of the black experience in white culture, recounting the experience of a Caucasian student at Harvard Law School and her African American boyfriend. She presents the details of unreasonable nasty police examination the couple often get while they are just driving around in a very affluent white suburban area. The words and attitude the police officers often have toward "niggers" and "nigger lovin' white sluts," and how it has been a routine for the police to check an African American man and a Caucasian woman together (53-4). As we know, we can easily find

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parallel examples in *Othello*. She then shows us how the officers change their attitude after finding out her status as a student at Harvard Law School, while offering no apologies to her boyfriend after holding a gun to his right temple.

What I want to focus here, however, is not the matter of truths or justice of O.J Simpson case or the episode she introduces, but rather the fact that a piece of classical English literature such as *Othello* can be used to talk about current critical issues. By reading the literature and also articles related to the piece, students are able to gain the knowledge of American society.

These types of assignments require a lot of reading, which should increase students' English competence as well. In practice, it would be difficult to cover both the literature and current articles depending on the length of the term. Of course, it would be ideal that students read *Othello* in English, but if there is no time for that, they could read in their own language and read other shorter articles in English, which should lead them to a discussion. Moreover, teachers can ask students to think about their own culture, since issues such as race and gender exist no matter where you are.

Meanwhile, few studies have been done on reading completed by Japanese students. Most have focused on ESL program in the English speaking countries. Besides, many of studies focus on the children under seventeen years old. However, I agree with the major opinion of the research papers saying that reading literature can play a critical role in immersing students in their target language, and I believe, it also applies to people in non-English speaking environments. In fact, Pugh (1989) and Krashen (1981) have examined the issue insisting that "reading is a potentially rich source of meaningful input outside the classroom, especially in settings where the target language is not the language of the environment" (Krashen, 320).

Furthermore, Pugh recommends hours of extended reading for its own sake, specifying that reading should be for pleasure. In this

sense, reading is regarded not as a vehicle for grammar/ translation learning but as a significant language and cultural experience in its own right (320). This approach to reading should have a positive impact. In fact, Devine (1984) examined the internalized reading models of ESL students at an American university and found that students who held a meaning centered view of reading tended to use more cognitive strategies, such as deriving meaning from context and re-reading, while those with a sound or word centered model relied more on dictionaries and translation at the word level (106, 321).

Again, these tasks actually have the students learn beyond the language. I believe that reading literature can promote understanding of other cultures, as well as provide opportunities for the students to develop their personal feelings by reflecting on the experience of reading literary texts. In my own teaching, I sometimes share personal experiences by explaining to students how I draw connections between language, culture, and the books I read (e.g. how the study of literature helped me gain a better understanding of the problems faced by minority groups in the U.S.). Drawing from my experience, I have come to believe that reading literature helps us appreciate the complexities behind culture and society, exploring the historical background of the piece and the characters. In this way, we come to understand that things cannot be classified simply as good or bad. By taking a global approach to the study of literature, I believe students can develop social awareness. Through that experience, students should then learn to think critically due to the exposure to different perspectives. Again, if we do not limit language teaching to gaining skills, but consider intercultural understanding, literature can be authentic material for learning English.

This essay focused on NNSE teachers, particularly those with a background in literature, and explores the potential of using their educational background. Despite the apparent limitation of NNSE

teachers as language models, their potential of becoming excellent learning models was discussed at the start. Sharing the language learning experience with students, NNSE teachers are able to show and lead the way to be a successful learner. Second, this essay examined the literature as the authentic material for language classes in which students are able to learn not only the language skill but also gain knowledge in other cultures. In this holistic approach to language learning, teachers with a background in literature must play a significant role. Moreover, those teachers who have been getting used to switching between their own culture/ language and the target one naturally aware the recent concept of English as an international language. Considering the arguments in this essay, we should take a pro-active approach that focuses on the potential of NNSE teachers.

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