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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Native and Non-Native Dichotomy:  
Challenges of and Attitudes Towards Native and Non-Native  
English Speaking Teachers

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# Native and Non-Native Dichotomy:

## Challenges of and Attitudes Towards Native and Non- Native English Speaking Teachers

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## ABSTRACT

The number of teachers of English continues to increase due to the importance of this language. This paper investigates the role of native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native English-speaking teachers (non-NESTs) in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, analysing the native concept, the challenges of and the NESTs, non-NESTs and students' attitudes towards both groups of teachers, in order to identify which type of teacher is the ideal English teaching model. Previous qualitative case studies and research were used to make a theoretical analysis of the English teachers' situation. Results showed that the native concept evaluates individuals according to their nativeness or birthright. The investigation also suggests that the native speaker fallacy is the main reason why challenges for NESTs and non-NESTs exist in the academic community. It also demonstrates that teachers and students' perceptions identify the ideal teacher of English as a combination of NESTs and non-NESTs strengths.

## KEYWORDS

Native speaker, non-native speaker, NEST, non-NEST, EFL, foreign language, student, education, academic, English language, English teaching.

## RESUMEN

El número de profesores de inglés sigue creciendo debido a la importancia de esta lengua. El presente trabajo investiga el rol de los profesores de inglés nativos y los profesores de inglés no nativos en contextos en los que el inglés se enseña como lengua extranjera, mediante el análisis del concepto nativo, los desafíos de estos profesores y las actitudes de

estudiantes, profesores de inglés nativos y no nativos hacia ambos grupos de profesores, con el propósito de identificar qué tipo de profesor es el modelo ideal de enseñanza de inglés.

Anteriores estudios de caso cualitativo e investigaciones han sido usadas para crear un análisis teórico de la situación de los profesores de inglés. Los resultados mostraron que el concepto nativo evalúa a los individuos de acuerdo a su natividad o derecho de nacimiento.

La investigación además sugiere que la falacia del hablante nativo es la razón principal por la cual existen los desafíos para los profesores de inglés nativos y los profesores de inglés no nativos en la comunidad académica. También demuestra que las percepciones de profesores y alumnos identifican el profesor ideal de inglés como una combinación de las mejores virtudes de los profesores de inglés nativos y de los profesores de inglés no nativos.

#### PALABRAS CLAVE

Hablante nativo, hablante no nativo, lengua extranjera, estudiante, educación, académico, lengua inglesa, enseñanza del inglés.

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## 1. Introduction

The English language has been fundamental in the process of globalization to connect people from different cultures and nationalities who do not share a mother tongue (Phillipson 147). Some scholars have identified English as the international language or the lingua franca of the world due to its significance as a bridge language and its social empowerment (Chun 565; Medgyes, *The Non-Native Teacher* 1-2). It plays a pivotal role in society and, as a result, many countries now pay special attention to the importance of the English language, and require English proficiency as a requisite to access tertiary education (Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism Continued* 83). Proficiency in English has become the main qualification required to acquire a better job and higher salary (Medgyes, *The Non-Native Teacher* 3; Phillipson 83; Chun 563). Consequently, the incapability to communicate in English may be seen as a professional disadvantage.

The significance of this language can be associated to the great demand for English language education, in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. The EFL setting refers to learning English in a country where English is an unofficial language and another language is the means of communication (Gutiérrez Arvizu 2). Thus, the number of native (NEST) and non-native English-speaking teachers of English (non-NEST) has increased (Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism Continued* 11). According to Medgyes, the difference between both types of teachers resides in the fact that the former “can never be as creative and original as those whom they have learnt to copy” (“Native or non-native” 342-343). Since the differences between NESTs and non-NESTs are the primary focus of this investigation, and in order to follow previous researchers, even though the use of these nomenclatures has raised doubts and debates in the educational community, this essay will use both concepts.

Recently, a considerable literature has grown around the theme of NEST and non-NEST. Canagarajah estimated that more than 80% of the world English teachers were non-

NEST in 1999 (91). However, non-NESTs are inauspiciously compared with NESTs, which leads to a hypothetical preference for NESTs over non-NESTs (Moussu and Llurda 316; Gutiérrez Arvizu 2; Walkinshaw and Duong 3; Lasagabaster and Sierra 132). This discrimination creates a number of challenges for both, NESTs and non-NESTs (Walkinshaw and Duong 3). In order to clarify these beliefs, it is important to consider teachers and students' perceptions towards NESTs and non-NEST. Taking together these ideas, the aim of this paper is to consider the situation of NESTs and non-NESTs discussing the problems of the native and non-native dichotomy, and analysing the challenges of and the different attitudes towards NESTs and non-NESTs in order to find which group of teachers is the ideal model for teaching.

## 2. Native and non-native dichotomy

Native is a concept frequently used in the literature, but to date there is no consensus about the extent of its meaning. Some scholars believe that using the term 'native' is inappropriate because of the inconsistent criteria to delimitate the concept (Canagarajah 78-79, Moussu and Llurda 317-318, Walkinshaw and Duong 2-3). Others think that, even though the term can be deceiving and fail to reflect the reality, it is present in the teacher community, studied as an investigation area in applied linguistics and, thus, useful to study the different behaviours of each group of teachers (Medgyes, *The Non-Native Teacher* ix, 11; Moussu and Llurda 316).

### 2.1 Definition of the *native* term

Several studies have documented the native speaker notion (See Chomsky; Paikeday; Rampton; Phillipson; Canagarajah; Medgyes; Moussu and Llurda). Medgyes analysed the major characteristics that have been attributed to native English speakers by previous researchers. The author found that the term is generally understood to mean that there is a correspondence between the speakers' birthplace and the national language of the country. Speakers should also learn English throughout their infancy surrounded by an English-

speaking family and context, which allow them to establish English as their first language. They should also have a native ability to speak English, and be able to produce improvised, fluent, accurate and creative speeches in English (Medgyes, *The Non-Native Teacher* 10). Notwithstanding that these features are generally accepted, there is a degree of uncertainty around the terminology.

## 2.2 Problems of this division

These features have been brought into question. Medgyes argues that there are children who were born in an English-speaking country but after a few years they moved with their family to a non-English country (*The Non-Native Teacher* 10). These children may not acquire English, or acquire two languages at the same time: English, the language spoken by their family, and the language of the new country. Medgyes reinforces his argument by wondering about the age at which English is acquired as the first language and the criterion to distinguish native from non-native (*The Non-Native Teacher* 10-11). Investigators also considered which countries are considered as English-speaking since there are indigenised English varieties coming from British colonised countries such as India, Kenya or Nigeria (Canagarajah 78; Medgyes, *The Non-Native Teacher* 4; Mossu and Lurda 317). Even though Kachru identified these type of speakers in his expanding circle of world Englishes as Outer Circle English speakers (3), the lack of contextualization of the native concept leads to confusion and does not clearly include colonised English speakers. Since Outer Circle speakers use English as the means of everyday communication, they should be considered as native speakers (Canagarajah 78; Moussu and Lurda 317).

In their detailed examination of native and non-native identities, Moussu and Lurda found that the term emphasises the Anglo-centrism position (317). In this view, English is seen as the only language recognised worldwide and, as a consequence, the relationship established with the English language is used to classify speakers. This relationship is based on the condition of having English as the mother tongue or having another mother tongue.



Phillipson associates this attitude to the linguistic imperialism that the English linguistic institutions have established (*Linguistic Imperialism* 47-48; *Linguistic Imperialism Continued* 11-15). The evidence suggests that the native and non-native dichotomy supports linguistic Anglo-centrism and, thus, being non-English-speaking could be perceived in a negative light.

### 2.3 Alternatives proposed

The problems of the native concept have been extensively discussed. However, the essence of the arguments is that the native/non-native distinction reinforces a negative connotation of being a non-native speaker. Furthermore, according to Phillipson, this perspective ignores the possibility of learning the language at a proficient level and accentuates the disproportionate division of linguistic power and resources (*Linguistic Imperialism* 47). Due to the inexistence of consensus between researchers, alternatives for the non-native term has been proposed in order to avoid the stress in the birthright superiority. Paikeday suggests “proficient user” (87), Rampton proposes “expert speaker” (98-99) and Holliday “competent user” (127). Nevertheless, Medgyes points out that native/non-native concepts are useful because they have been in fact superficially defined (*The Non-Native Teacher* 11). Therefore, further research is required to determine the specific limits of the *native* concept.

## 3. Challenges of native and non-native English teachers

### 3.1 The native speaker fallacy

#### 3.1.1 Definition

The challenges of NESTs and non-NESTs have been objects of research since 1980s (See Kachru; Paikeday; Edge; Rampton; Medgyes) . In light of recent studies in the position of NESTs and non-NESTs, it is becoming extremely difficult to ignore the existence of the native speaker fallacy. Contemporary scholars use this term to refer to the attitude of undervaluing the language skill of non-native speakers and, therefore, considering that the native speakers' language skills are superior (Canagarajah 80; Phillipson 193-199). According

to Martínez Agudo and Robinson, this belief is a dominant approach because "non-NESTs are viewed as linguistically handicapped in comparison to NESTs" (233).

### 3.1.2 Supporters

Paradoxically, language institutions and publishing companies in English-speaking countries support this fallacy (Canagarajah 77; Moussu and Llurda 316; Walkinshaw and Duong 2). According to Walkinshaw and Duong, institutions defend their position by stating that learners prefer NESTs over non-NEST as English teachers (1). Thus, NESTs acquire higher salaries, better academic positions and even greater prestige (Martínez Agudo and Robinson 232; Gutiérrez Arvizu 2; Walkinshaw and Duong 3).

### 3.2 Challenges of non-NESTs

There is increasing concern that non-NESTs are being disadvantaged. Nonetheless, research suggests that there is a lack of substantial evidence to support the native speaker fallacy (Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism* 195; Canagarajah 79-80, Medgyes, *The Non-Native Teacher* 11; Martínez Agudo and Robinson 234). Canagarajah argues that excellent pronunciation and accurate grammar are not the only skills required to be a successful teacher (77). Phillipson supports this idea and states that teachers can be successful despite their mother tongue (195). Therefore, it can be said that there is a lack of empirical argument to support the students' hypothetical preference for NESTs over non-NESTs.

Even though the validity of the native speaker fallacy has been widely criticised, the discrimination against non-NESTs is still tangible in the teachers' community. Thus, most challenges that non-NESTs suffer are a consequence of these prejudices since it affects non-NESTs role. Scholars complain that non-NEST are frequently rejected when they apply for English language teaching (ELT) jobs because of their nativeness (Canagarajah 77-78; Moussu and Llurda 316). Lower salaries and fewer benefits are offered to them because they are considered second-rate educators (Walkinshaw and Duong 3; Chun 564). Martínez Agudo

and Robinson state that these challenges also affect non-NESTs self-image (232). Sometimes, non-NESTs can perceive themselves as incompetent teachers because of the inferiority they receive in some institutions (Martínez Agudo and Robinson 233; Medgyes, *The Non-Native Teacher* 40). According to Gan, non-NESTs feel pressure about their language skills which makes them express anxiety over their limited English skills (93). Researchers agree that it is important to evaluate language teachers according their pedagogical competence, their teaching skills, enthusiasm and language qualifications, in order to diminish the effects of these significant challenges (Martínez Agudo and Robinson 234; Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism* 195; Medgyes, *The Non-Native Teacher* 39).

### 3.3 Challenges of NESTs

Scholars are also very critical about NESTs challenges when teaching in EFL settings. According to Walkinshaw and Duong, due to the native speaker fallacy, Asian countries hire native speakers of English despite the lack of qualifications of the teachers (8). Chun observed that NESTs used EFL teaching jobs as an easy way to make money when they study abroad and, in most cases, NESTs were unprepared for the job (564). Even though scholars claim that being a native speaker of English does not mean that one naturally speaks the language well (Rampton 97-98; Moussu and Llorca 316), those NESTs, who are employed with high school qualifications or degrees not related with English language teaching, are employed only because of their native status (Walkinshaw and Duong 8). Lasagabaster and Sierra indicate that in Spain there are NESTs in language academies without teaching qualifications who have been hired only because of their mother tongue (132). These NESTs are prone to lose control of the class (Walkinshaw and Duong 8; Lasagabaster and Sierra 132). However, this challenge could be diminished if the same rigorous procedures for hiring non-NESTs are used to select NESTs.

Accuracy in English is needed to teach the language, but knowing the students' mother tongue is also important. In their admirable investigation into NESTs position in the ESL context, Walkinshaw and Duong have identified that not sharing the first language with students is a challenge for NESTs (4). They claim that if lectures are ineffective in the second language, NESTs cannot use the students' first language to facilitate the understanding. This has been exemplified in the work undertaken by Gan. He found that some Chinese teachers, who came from mainland, challenged problems maintaining the control of the class because of their inability of speaking the dominant language of the local community (Gan 101). Furthermore, in the survey directed by Chun, students complained that their NESTs were incapable of understanding their first language and their culture (573). They felt frustrated because communication failed. Hence, not sharing the learners' mother tongue and cultural background could lead to misunderstanding and, therefore, the lesson could be useless and the teacher unsuccessful.

Familiarity with the local culture is also important. As Walkinshaw and Duong explain, NESTs expect a specific type of classroom interaction which they can anticipate in their home countries. However, the difference of cultures acts as an important factor and affects the pedagogy area and students reactions. According to Walkinshaw and Duong, unfamiliarity with the target culture and its educational framework "could potentially generate classroom tension" (10). However, Walkinshaw and Duong's investigation only provides information about NESTs hired for short-terms. The study would have been more convincing if it had considered NESTs hired with long-term teaching contracts, since they could have acquired a higher level of local culture awareness. A possible area of future research would be to investigate if the impact of the foreign culture in long-term NESTs is as significant in their teaching style as in short-term NESTs.

#### 4. Attitudes towards NESTs and non-NESTs

#### 4.1 As seen by themselves

Recent researchers investigating the NESTs and non-NESTs dichotomy have focused their attention on the attitudes towards both type of teachers of English. The primary concern of researchers is to verify if the educational community prefer NEST over non-NESTs. Kasai, Lee and Kim point out that in previous researches NESTs demonstrated superior self-perception of their English language skills than non-NESTs (274). NESTs usually consider themselves effective teaching speaking, vocabulary or oral skills and feel unconfident with areas such as grammar and testing (Kasai, Lee and Kim 274). Thus, according to Kasai, Lee and Kim, non-NESTs perceived themselves as more skilled in teaching grammar while NESTs saw themselves as more competent in speaking skills (274).

Multiple studies have focused their attention on non-NESTs since they were seen as the underestimated group. According to Medgyes, non-NESTs see themselves as inferior to NESTs because of evident imperfections of their English skills (*The Non-Native Teacher* 40). The author states that non-NESTs are clearly less able to produce proficient English than NESTs because non-NESTs are imitators (*The Non-Native Teacher* 33). Therefore, it is reasonable that non-NESTs feel unconfident of their English skills. Researchers have observed that being self-conscious of English mistakes can lead to self-discrimination, thus producing a poor self-image which can dwindle language performance (Medgyes, *The Non-Native Teacher* 35-40; Moussu and Llurda 323). However, hard work and dedication may improve non-NESTs English abilities and reduce the lack of self-assurance.

In his investigation, Medgyes found that the skills non-NESTs felt more insecure were vocabulary, oral fluency and grammar (*The Non-Native Teacher* 34-37). Researchers claim that the general attitude of students, NESTs colleagues, and even non-NESTs, towards non-NESTs insecurities, is to criticise non-NESTs language mistakes and undervalue their abilities to teach English (Moussu and Llurda 323; Moussu 26). Thus, non-NESTs competence and

teaching skills are questioned. However, at the same time, they admire NESTs even though they "make some occasional mistakes while teaching, or [do] not know all the details about the English language" (Moussu and Llurda 323). Hence, the general belief between English teachers is that NESTs and non-NESTs perceive their role, their strengths and weaknesses differently based on their mother tongue.

#### 4.2 As seen by students

Even though NESTs and non-NESTs' opinions about their teacher role is important, they cannot always judge objectively their work. Thus, students' attitude has been target of a number of investigations. Regarding students' beliefs about NESTs, students identify them as language models (Medgyes, *The Non-Native Teacher* 54-55). Most studies coincide that oral skills, vocabulary, cultural knowledge, and speaking are the linguistic areas which NESTs are preferred to teach (Moussu and Lurda 327; Chun 569; Kasai, Lee and Kim 279-284; Gutiérrez Arvizu 7; Martínez Agudo and Robinson 238-240). Chun highlights that students declared a clear preference for NESTs in speaking areas because they thought that talking with native speakers of English prepare them to use their oral language abilities in a real context (570). Therefore, the student's preference for NESTs over non-NESTs in those specific areas seems logical because student perceived that non-NESTs, in most of the cases, help them to pass test but did not prepare them to use their language skills outside the class (Chun 569). Furthermore, students in Moussu and Llurda investigation have perceived that non-NESTs demonstrate poorer oral skills and a lack of knowledge about English-speaking culture (327).

Moreover, Chun's survey indicates that students perceived NESTs as more open minded than non-NESTs, who were seen as more formal and strict, and value NESTs' wide diversity of teaching methods (568-573). Martínez Agudo and Robinson indicate that, in their study, learners had a predilection for NESTs who were able to speak their mother tongue (239). Walkinshaw and Duong declare that the ignorance of students' mother tongue and

needs influences negatively the quality of the education (9). In contrast, recent studies suggest that NESTs are sometimes seen in a negative light. Researches' analysis indicate that NESTs' lack of knowledge of grammar, their difficulties answering questions and lack of experience as second language learners lead students to prefer non-NESTs as supporters in the language process (Moussu and Llurda 327; Chun 575).

Regarding students' beliefs about non-NESTs, the analysis of researchers surveys indicates that non-NESTs are seen by students as language learner models because they provide a source of motivation (Moussu and Llurda 327; Martínez Agudo and Robinson 239; Chun 568; Medgyes, *The Non-Native Teacher* 54-55). According to investigators, non-NESTs are more aware of students' linguistic problems and needs and, therefore, can help them more effectively in psychological and academic aspects of language learning (Chun 574; Lasagabaster and Sierra 133). Thus, in multiple studies students perceived non-NESTs as understanding and sensitive to their learning difficulties (Moussu and Llurda 327; Chun 574; Lasagabaster and Sierra 133). Students in Martínez Agudo and Robinson survey valued that non-NESTs are able to predict language learning difficulties that NESTs may ignore (239). The English language skills which students' prefer to learn from non-NEST include grammar and writing (Moussu and Llurda 327; Chun 569). Walkinshaw and Duong observed that students value non-NESTs enthusiasm because it encourages students, and appreciate the non-NESTs' familiarity with their local culture and first language (9-10). With respect to listening and reading, the findings are not conclusive due to inconsistency of students answers which vary depending on the country they come from and their experiences with NESTs (See Chun 569; Martínez Agudo and Robinson 239; Gutiérrez Arvizu 7).

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the purpose of the current study was to analyse the present situation of NESTs and non-NESTs, and determine which type of teacher is the ideal model to teach

English in an EFL context. This study has identified the problems of the native concept. Its lack of contextualization, the lack of criterion to distinguish native from non-native speakers and the negativity that the division transmits are the main issues founded. The second major finding was that the native speaker fallacy creates and encourages challenges for both, NESTs and non-NESTs. It encourages discrimination against non-NESTs and leads to an increase in the number of low-quality teaching jobs, which are occupied by unprepared and inexperienced NESTs. The main challenges of non-NESTs that this investigation has found were the discrimination and inferiority non-NESTs face in their jobs. The cultural shock, and the lack of qualification and students' first language awareness are the principal challenges that have been identified for NESTs.

The investigation of NESTs, non-NESTs and students' perceptions about the NESTs and non-NESTs role has shown that NESTs and non-NESTs have different strengths and weaknesses. Students had not a clear preference for one group over the other. Instead, their teacher choice varies depending the linguistic area, which indicates that both groups of teachers can be successful teachers in their own terms. Thus, the evidence confirms that NESTs provide a language model, while non-NESTs provide a learner model.

The investigations discussed have been carried out in more than fifteen countries, a size large enough for making generalizations. However, most of these countries are in Asia, apart from Spain, Hungary, US and Mexico. Hence, a note of caution is due here because this fact could be a source of weakness in this study since the paucity of studies in other parts of the world could affect the results of these findings. The results of this investigation may be somewhat limited and further work in the other continents would be required to be more precise in analysing the general beliefs of teachers and students of English all around the world.



Notwithstanding these limitations, this research has provided a framework for the exploration of NESTs and non-NESTs issues. The findings of this investigation could be used to improve NESTs and non-NESTs situation and, thus, boost a quality education in EFL areas. This study has demonstrated that the prejudices about non-NESTs are false and that NESTs lack a number of qualities which are congruent with the notion of an ideal English teacher. Overall, the findings of this investigation complement those of earlier studies and suggest that the ideal teacher model is a combination of NESTs and non-NESTs strengths. Therefore, a realistic approach to tackle this issue could be to allow collaboration between both types of English teacher.

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