

Un-teaching Native Speaker Fallacy: A Practical Application and Discussion

Tan Arda Gedik

Background

Native speaker (NS) fallacy in second language acquisition (SLA) is a condition where NSs are deemed linguistically and qualitatively more superior than L2 speakers. This stems from a decade-long conventional wisdom engendered by generativist linguists without providing much evidence for it (e.g., Bley-Vroman 2009: 179; Chomsky 1975: 11). This wisdom assumes that all NSs uniformly succeed at mastering their L1. Studies show that this may not be the case as print exposure and other individual differences in the cognitive machinery result in different representations and production of the same input (e.g., Dąbrowska 2018: 2019; Kidd et al. 2018). Print exposure is known to foster better language performance as written language exposes speakers to more complex language than spoken modes, which helps with ultimate language attainment of any form (Roland et al. 2007). Similarly, there is fifty years of research emphasizing the importance of individual differences (IDs) in abilities in L1 (e.g., phonological memory) predicting L2 success (Sparks 2022). So far, print exposure seems to be the best predictor of linguistic performance and IDs in comparisons between NSs and non-NSs, with high-print-exposure L2 speakers outperforming low-print-exposure L1 speakers (Dąbrowska 2019).

With such evidence, it becomes feasible to deconstruct the fallacy in SLA as most of SLA and teacher training are based on it (Mahboob 2005). This fallacy is known to lead to several problems in nonnative (English) speaker teachers (NNESTs) such as being pushed to the periphery, feeling less-than-human, and questioning their legitimacy as teachers (e.g., Phillipson 1992; Selvi 2014). The extent of these problems has been discussed from different perspectives, mainly from social, philosophical, or ethical (e.g., Aneja 2016; Bonfiglio 2013; Selvi 2018). Nevertheless, it has not been much problematized in teacher education or linguistics from a linguistic point of view. Thus, this chapter provides a proposed lesson plan for teachers (and candidates) as to why the assumed NS ideal may not always be the case and what discussions are needed to NS-centric formulations to being a language user/teacher.

This lesson plan is intended to be implemented at an undergraduate-level foreign language (especially English) teacher training program, as part of a SLA-related course. I believe the lesson plan would be exceptionally useful for a practice-based teacher education program but is applicable to any language teacher education setting. The intended duration of the lesson is 60~ minutes and can be used within any course with/out a teaching methodology component. This lesson plan was originally designed for a psycholinguistics course at an undergraduate level in psychology but is applicable to different undergraduate majors, especially language teachers and linguistics. With modifications to the tasks, the target group can also include graduate students.

Description of the Practice

The aim of this lesson plan is to teach teacher candidates and linguists at under(graduate) levels that NSs do not uniformly converge on the same grammar, at times L2 speakers can outperform L1 speakers (e.g., Dąbrowska 2019). This is especially important from an SLA perspective because courses in these programs are still mostly based on the monolingual bias and the premise that NSs reach an idealized end destination in attaining L1, and therefore NSs are inherently linguistically better than NNSs (Mahboob 2005).

In the introduction, the lecturer asks the following discussion questions to engage teacher candidates (TCs). This achieves objective #1 (Discuss the terms NS/NNS and what separates them according to the students)

1. Who is a native speaker?
2. Why/why do we not need the separation?
3. What separates NS/NNSs?

This explores what the TCs think of the topic (that NSs do not exist in their idealized forms and NSs are not necessarily linguistically better than NNSs) and gives the lecturer an overall picture of TCs opinions on the issue. Then, by extending the questions in the continuation, the lecturer aims to gather if the TCs believe L1/L2 speakers differ much in learning language, and if the TCs believe in NS fallacy. By asking about IDs, the lecturer prepares students for a destabilizing of the fallacy in later parts of the lecture (achieves objective #2: Given examples of what IDs in lexicogrammar are). The following questions can be raised for this part:

1. Do you believe L2 learners differ in their linguistic knowledge? How?
2. What about L1 learners? Do you think there are differences? How?
3. Give examples of IDs in lexicogrammatical knowledge from your life (either L1 or L2)
4. Why do you think IDs are important for our NS/NNS dichotomy discussion?

Then, in a short task on an interactive platform (e.g., PollEverywhere), the lecturer asks the TCs if they are aware of any teaching methodology that accommodates such IDs

in both L1/L2 learning (achieves objective #2: Discussed how linguistics and teaching methodologies have accommodated IDs). This further sets the scene for a destabilizing of the fallacy. During the lecture, the lecturer presents linguistic discussions of on what grounds linguists proposed NS fallacy and how it does not hold up well against experimental evidence (see [Dabrowska 2016: 70–103](#) for a discussion of the experimental evidence). The content of the lecture should allow for a discussion of the implications of this line of research to achieve objective #4 (Discussed the implications of usage-based studies and IDs studies by answering at least three questions during the lecture). Possible questions to ask overlap with the ones at the end of the next paragraph.

This is where the destabilizing of the fallacy begins by showing NNESTs that they can also perform at the level of or at times outperform NSs. The TCs are asked to share their personal accounts of experiencing the dichotomy as a TC and how they reacted to it (achieves objective #5: Shared personal stories having experienced the dichotomy). This part of the lecture also includes how culture or socioeconomic status, which has been reported to be tied to ethnicity (e.g., Cross 2018), may play a role in deepening the fallacy by raising the following questions: With so much variation within NSs we need to reflect on: which group do we pick to represent NSs? Are they highly literate speakers? Do they need to come from a certain background (i.e., racial, socioeconomic)? Does the term NS represent all the linguistic and sociocultural variation within NS communities? Or do we pick a certain group as linguists and ignore the consequences of this action? How does basing our discussions in SLA on a monolithic understanding of NS affect L2 speaking communities in the periphery? Does it have oppressionist, colonial, or racist implications? How does this inform our teaching training programs and methodologies? Where do we go from here in teacher training programs?

Such critical questioning will potentially show the TCs that (a) NS fallacy has serious implications that teacher training programs may not discuss, and (b) this fallacy is an idealized illusion that is based on nonempirical claims (e.g., Bley-Vroman 2009). By doing this, the TCs will also realize that being a NNEST does not indicate linguistic subordination by NSs, and brings to the table that race, socioeconomic status, and potentially colonialism are bundled together and result in NS fallacy and its adverse effects (see [Gedik and Arpaözü 2022](#) for a discussion). The performance task has two alternatives, either an in-class debate or a response essay if there is no time. In the debate, the TCs are asked why or why not the dichotomy should be kept and are asked to provide both linguistic and nonlinguistic evidence for their arguments. Similarly, the response essay is the same task but in written format (achieves objective #6: Debated the NS/NNS dichotomy in two groups (for/against) by using linguistic and other extra-linguistic evidence).

Critical Reflections: Potentials and Challenges

Deconstructing the term NS does not deny that a group of people speak a language “natively.” What I suggest is the use of L1, L2 ... or L_x instead of the term “native speaker,” in which L# only suggests the developmental sequence of the learned languages.

Unless the critical questions in this chapter (among many others) are acknowledged in our (applied) linguistics programs, we may be one of the factors powering the dichotomy and its concomitant adverse implications. Thus, our discussions in teacher training programs should acknowledge the importance of these questions and the destabilization of NS fallacy based on both linguistic and nonlinguistic evidence against the convergence hypothesis.

Based on teaching why the term NS is problematic in a psycholinguistics course in Turkey, I expect TCs and possibly teacher trainers will find this quite shocking. Most of the reactions revolved around struggling to accept that NSs were far from reaching an idealized NS point. The most difficult part to accept was the deterministic nature of the socioeconomic status of a family or person can determine how close this person will be placed to the norm of NS. Some students resisted on the basis of believing that there must be a difference between NSs/NNs. After all, deconstruction of conventional wisdom is always difficult to accept at first. However, I believe it is this shock value that will empower NNESTCs in reconfiguring their status in the world of ELT as transformative. While the field of ELT in Turkey has not embraced a critical perspective, in my experience, students are eager to discuss the relevance of critical implications of the fallacy when given the chance. I suggest using anecdotes or real-life examples which explain personal accounts of how this fallacy affects NNEST(s)Cs may be of help in operationalizing the adverse effects of the fallacy on people. A challenge is that this lesson plan is only designed for a single event. As such, it may not be enough to help TCs reconfigure this conventional wisdom and the dichotomies it creates in ELT. A suggestion is using this lesson plan as a springboard to organize events and getting TCs involved to investigate the effects of this fallacy in other subfields of teacher training programs (e.g., material creation, language testing). That way, this deconstruction and its subsequent potential empowerment of TCs may become more realistic. Another challenge is getting familiar with the relevant linguistic literature for educators and TCs, for which I suggest Dąbrowska (2015, 2019) who provides to the point examples of the relevant literature.

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Appendix

The lesson plan is accessible as a separate document at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MEoqIjqwgcUK6s7Ay9jIH272dX6M4wgH3Ykwj3hh28Q/edit?usp=sharing>

