Language Teaching (2025), **58**, 283–285
doi:10.1017/S0261444824000272

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The native/non-native debate: A practitioner responds

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(Received 28 June 2024; accepted 3 July 2024)

It is, perhaps, with some surprise that I find the native/non-native divide again attracting attention. The first I remember of this being an issue was when we were informed that the native speaker was dead (Paikeday, 1985). Needless to say, to those of us who did not feel at all deceased, this came as a surprise, but the announcement certainly attracted attention. The next contribution to the debate that I remember was Peter Medgyes's (1992) question regarding whether native or non-native was worth more. And so the dispute has continued spasmodically until the present, when we find two pieces on the subject within two recent issues of *Language Teaching* (Llurda & Calvet-Terré, 2024; Selvi et al., 2024).

Although both of these articles are very well written, and although the very fact that we have two such pieces back-to-back in a prestigious journal such as *Language Teaching* clearly signals that the issue is still far from dead, it seems to me a great pity, for one thing, that the terms 'native' and 'non-native' are still being employed, although arguments against them have been circulating for a long time (e.g. Rampton, 1990). More recently, Dewaele (2018, p. 236) insists the terms must 'be rejected', and according to Holliday (2018), merely by continuing to use these terms, we are actually perpetuating the underlying prejudices. Nevertheless, although both Selvi et al. (2024) and Llurda and Calvet-Terré (2024) acknowledge the criticism of the terms, they continue to use them in spite of their 'problematic and contested' (Selvi et al., 2024, p. 16) nature. Surely avoiding using these problematic terms does not equate to avoiding 'openly talking about' the issue, as Llurda & Calvet-Terré (2024, p. 230) suggest; it merely means choosing more accurate and appropriate terminology, which is normally considered a basic requirement for any sound research.

Of course, it is one thing to say what should NOT be done, but another to find satisfactory alternatives, and perhaps this is the very reason the native speaker/non-native speaker (NS/NNS) terminology has survived as long as it has. The term 'native', of course, just means 'born', but over the years it has acquired often pejorative and discriminatory collocations. Personally, I prefer to talk of a first language (L1), meaning the first one a child acquires in the home. Of course, even this is not totally unproblematic, because many homes operate on more than one language. Nevertheless, in my experience, even plurilingual homes usually have a dominant language, although I accept that the situation is not always totally straightforward. It is, nevertheless, the best that I am currently aware of as a term to cover multiple real-life complexities.

As for 'non-native', the essentially negative nature of the term situates it at the deficit end of the scale. Surely it is much better to use a term that emphasises the positive. Personally, again, I prefer the term 'additional' (L+) language, as promoted by Anderson (2022, p. 427), as an 'equitable' alternative.

Perhaps before continuing, I should make my own interest in the topic clear. I was born into a family that spoke English in the home in an English-speaking environment (United Kingdom). My parents emigrated to New Zealand (another environment where English is the L1 of the majority of the population) while I was still quite young. I qualified as an English teacher and taught English-speaking high-school kids for some years before moving into Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444824000272 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(TESOL), first in NZ and then in various locations overseas. In short, I guess I am a quintessential speaker of English as an L1. Sorry about that!

To return to Medgyes's (1992) question (who is worth more?), the first time I can remember it being a problem was when I was the Director of Studies of a language school. In July/August in NZ we have a major influx of students who come in groups during the northern hemisphere summer break. This means a sudden urgent need for extra teachers, and I hired two lovely ladies.

One was Chinese; I will call her Xiao here. She was very well qualified (Ph.D.), had lived and worked in the United States for years and was married to an American. Her English was excellent (much better, in fact, than many L1 English speakers) and she spoke with a soft American accent that was almost entirely indistinguishable from an L1 speaker. But when the incoming students (the majority of whom were themselves Chinese) saw her, I had a major problem. They were indignant and demanded a change of teacher. 'We spent all this money to come here to learn from a native speaker', they insisted. I resisted as long as I could, but when the agent got involved and threatened to never send any more students to our school (which greatly alarmed the school's owners), I had no choice. Fortunately, the teachers hired for these groups were on short-term contracts, so it was easy enough to just not renew the contract when it expired, and Xiao had no trouble finding herself a much better job in the university, where, as far as I know, she still is.

The other was Russian; I will call her Julia Petrovka. She, too, was very well qualified, with a Ph.D. in pronunciation, in the course of which she had acquired an impeccable Received Pronunciation accent. She was easier than Xiao, since she did not stand out as a non-L1 speaker of English merely by looking at her, but as soon as students saw her name, they realised her background and the complaints began. Fortunately, it was not long before she too got herself a job at the university, and so the problem resolved itself satisfactorily.

The point I am trying to make by recounting these very human stories is that, although somehow underlying almost all of the NS/NNS literature is the assumption that it is the L1 speakers of English, the 'imperialists', who 'impose NS idealization on NNS' (Llurda & Calvet-Terré, 2024, p. 231) who are the problem, this is by no means always the case.

The two cases that I describe above involved teachers who had learnt English as an additional language (L+) and were looking for employment in an English L1 environment. More recently, I have been working on English Language Teacher (ELT) education courses in the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus, where Turkish is the dominant language. Here the issues are rather different. There are four of us contracted teachers on this course. I am the only L1 speaker of English, two are L1 speakers of Turkish, and the fourth is Iranian (L1 Farsi). As far as I am aware, we work together in a very cooperative group. There are times when they ask me for help, especially with things like idiomatic or colloquial English, or with editing articles that have been returned from journals with instructions to 'get it checked by a native speaker'! They help me when I run out of common language to explain something to my students and they can use their common L1 (most of the students are also Turkish) to explain. An example of this occurred recently during exams when we had a problem with the room. While struggling to explain where we needed to go, one of my Turkish colleagues appeared and clarified the situation in no time.

Selvi et al. (2024) suggest a number of advantages for L1 or L+ teachers, such as that L1 speakers can provide an authentic role model for pronunciation and idiomatic language use. Those who have learnt English as an additional language (L+) can provide a convincing model of a successful learner, they are often better at explaining grammar (since this is often the way they learned), and they are able to empathise with learners' difficulties.

So, in answer to Peter Medgyes's (1992) question of who is worth more, surely both L1 and L+ speakers have strengths that they can bring to the learning endeavour. The best results are therefore achieved when they work harmoniously together within such constraints as there might be regarding factors such as learning context, student expectations, or collegial relations. Actually, this is more-or-less the same conclusion that Peter came to more than 30 years ago. Surely it is well past time that we learned how to maximise the affordances of cooperation between those who speak a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444824000272 Published online by Cambridge University Press

language as their first (L1) and those who learn it as an additional language (L+), since collaboration can produce such useful, win-win results.

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Cite this article: Griffiths, C. (2025). The native/non-native debate: A practitioner responds. *Language Teaching*, 58(2), 283–285. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444824000272

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444824000272 Published online by Cambridge University Press