Are native English-speaking teachers more qualified? A Critical Review of Blum and Johnson's (2012) Article 'Reading Repression: Textualizing the Linguistic Marginalization of Non-native English-Speaking Teachers in Arizona'

Danyang Zhang
University of Cambridge, UK
dz298@cam.ac.uk

With the profound and widespread influence of English in this globalised and interdependent world, scholars are paying more attention to the quality of English education; this quality intricately relates to the abilities and qualifications of English teachers. Therefore, a debate on how to treat native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) is becoming increasingly prevalent both in the academic field and public discourse. Blum and Johnson's (2012) article is based on a phenomenon in Arizona, where the policymakers marginalised public school teachers who have accents. The authors mainly analyse the comments made in response to a *Wall Street Journal* article, and in fact, they strive to highlight the cultural and professional rights of NNESTs. In this critical review, I will firstly illustrate the socio-political and sociolinguistic background and a debate between NEST and NNEST in language teaching and learning, before summarising and evaluating Blum and Johnson's (2012) findings by relevant literature, as well as from a personal perspective. Considering the heated discussion about the importance of foreign accent in second language successful learning (Cook, 1999), issues about accent will be considered in this review. Specifically, issues such as the correlation between NNESTs and teachers who have strong accents, the impacts of teachers' accents on students' language acquisition, teacher evaluation as well as discrimination toward NNESTs will be discussed.

Keywords: native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), linguistic discrimination, English language education, teacher evaluation, critical review

Introduction

Since 2000, anti-immigrant legislation has been disseminated by media in the US, and this has influenced public opinion; subsequently, policymakers have successfully introduced laws limiting the rights of immigrants and language-minority communities. Blum and Johnson (2012) wrote this article - *'Reading Repression: Textualizing the Linguistic Marginalization of Nonnative English-Speaking Teachers in Arizona'* under this political and social background. They started with the hidden socio-political backdrop concerning immigrants and language-minority communities in Arizona, where many Mexican immigrants have been restricted from moving to the US.

Blum and Johnson (2012) state some punitive measures aimed at undocumented immigrants, which gave rise to a heated debate about immigration policies in 2000. They also describe how these legislative and policy attempts to illustrate the tendency toward ethnic assimilation in the Arizona Department of Education. Specifically, in the language education field, they focus on NESTs and NNESTs by analysing the debate over Arizona's teacher fluency requirement, which not merely aims to highlight social perspectives of educators, but also emphasise the general public's opinions about "acceptable English teacher" and appropriate accents for English teachers. In specific, the discussion further addresses the social and linguistic

homogenisation behind the education policies in Arizona and demonstrates their stance as advocacy against the cultural and professional discrimination (Blum & Johnson, 2012).

Under the circumstance that "native speakerism" (Holliday, 2005) has already been widely recognised and discussed in the English teaching and learning, this critical review draws on Blum and Johnson's (2012) article, aiming at analysing and discussing the vital issues involving discrimination of NNESTs and evaluation of English language teachers. By drawing on relevant literature, previous research and personal opinions, this review aims to cover some crucial issues such as: (1) whether NESTs are equal to the teachers who are standard English speakers; (2) whether teachers' accent is directly related to their students' English language acquisition; (3) whether there is a reasonable set of teacher evaluation criteria; (4) whether there are other factors behind discrimination, etc., in order to provide some theoretical and pedagogical insights in English language education.

A debate between NEST and NNEST

According to Blum and Johnson (2012), many scholars divergently position NEST and NNEST. For instance, the idea of NNESTs as deficient teachers is prominent in Quirk's (1961) study, which prioritises native speakers and proposes avoiding a variety of dialects. Scholars like Paikeday (1985) regard native speaker, especially educated native speaker as an arbiter for evaluating linguistic matters. Paikeday (1985) claims that native speakers have intuitive insights or senses that enable correct and appropriate language use both in a grammatical and ungrammatical way. Moreover, their language teaching and learning competence has become pedagogically significant in helping language learners correctly and appropriately acquire a language, especially when they aim to pursue a native accent (Canagarajah, 1999).

However, Blum and Johnson (2012) cited Medgyes (2001) who opposes the discrimination and marginalisation of NNESTs. Additionally, there are many scholars like Robert Phillipson challenging the myth of native speakers, putting forward to "the native speaker fallacy" (Phillipson, 1992, p.194) that is against the dominance of native speaker in teaching English. At the same time, the advantages of NNESTs have been seriously taken into consideration. For instance, Medgyes (1994) regards NNESTs as a group of positive models in English language learning who have empathy with their students. Compared with NESTs, they, as language learners, are more experienced in teaching students from their learning experiences, summarising many effective language learning strategies for them (Medgyes, 1994), assisting them to predict then prevent language learning difficulties, and taking advantages of their common mother tongue if applicable (Kamhi-Stein, 1999; Medgyes, 1999).

Method and key findings of Blum and Johnson (2012)

In practice, Blum and Johnson (2012) collected 158 comments responding to Miriam Jordan's online *Wall Street Journal* article titled *"Arizona Grades Teachers on Fluency"* to collect the public comments about Arizona Department of Education's latest approach to discriminate language-minority communities. They categorised the comments into two groups: those including criticisms of NNESTs (55 comments, 35%) and those including criticisms of the Arizona Department of Education (39 comments, 25%). Moreover, 64 comments (40%) interrelates with accents and they are about education policy as well as immigration.

Specifically, Blum and Johnson (2012) categorised the criticisms of NNESTs into three groups. Firstly, students prefer to learn to talk like and imitate their teachers, so some language errors the teachers have might be taken by students and negatively impact them. Secondly, there is a commonly recognisable sense that the ability to speak English, especially standard English with an idealised accent that is spoken by white, middle class speakers (Lippi-Green, 1997), is an undoubted pathway to success; some comments indicate there is a specific standard form of English for a country. Moreover, Blum and Johnson (2012) also illustrate the criticisms of the Arizona Department of Education including the absence of a definition of an ideal accent, the inaccuracy of equating teaching ability with an accent as well as racial discriminations. These criticisms call for a reassessment of the roles and effects of accent and the corresponding relations between teacher's accents and student's language learning performances.

In summary, Blum and Johnson (2012) outline the contributions that linguistic diversity (e.g. diverse dialects and accents) and cultural knowledge from immigrants make to society, and they recommend that schools become spaces to foster acceptance and curiosity rather than animosity.

Evaluation and discussion of Blum and Johnson (2012)

Blum and Johnson (2012) comprehensively summarise and analyse linguistic discrimination of NNESTs in Arizona. Firstly, they cite a variety of scientific and convincing theories and arguments. The authors not only take account of the reality itself, but also examine the socio-political and theoretical foundation to justify the research rationale in theoretical and practical fields, and these lay a solid foundation for further discussion and investigation. Secondly, the demonstration of two opposing notions – criticisms of NNESTs and criticisms of the Arizona Department of Education is clear and comparable. On the one side, people who criticised NNESTs believe that students prefer to talk like their English teachers; there is a form of standard English that undoubtedly has positive impacts on people's life. On the other side, people who criticised the Arizona Department of Education assert that the definition of ideal accent is not clear, and teacher's teaching ability does not entirely attribute to their accent. Also, the racial discrimination behind the linguistic discrimination has been highlighted (Blum & Johnson, 2012). These factual and persuasive arguments are provided to demonstrate the different notions from different groups of people, which may stimulate more insightful discussions in solving linguistic discrimination problems, benefiting teacher evaluation and promoting English language education.

To some extent, the article redresses existing stereotypes and misbeliefs that NESTs are bound to be more capable than NNESTs by demonstrating NNESTs' advantages in English education like understanding student's learning difficulties, having experiences in imparting effective language learning strategies and so on (Blum & Johnson, 2012). In the long term, these notions will pioneer a new approach to assess English teachers and encourage the idea of the equity of NESTs' and NNESTs' quality as well as value; ultimately this encourages equal treatment in recruitment, evaluations and working rights. Furthermore, Blum and Johnson (2012) provide suggestions for practice including prioritising respect towards various types of culture and accents as well as the contributions non-native speakers make to a country. They also emphasise the significant roles of schools where the diversity and curiosity of students and teachers should be advocated and valued.

However, Blum and Johnson (2012) have not discussed some critical issues in linguistic discrimination and teacher evaluation in more depth. Firstly, they did not prove or question whether the teachers who speak standard English can be considered the same as the NEST in language production. It is crucial to discuss the definitions of native speakers and non-native speakers. One definition describes an English native speaker as an individual who was born in an English-speaking country (Davies, 1991). Medgyes (2001, p. 430) claims "the native speaker of English is traditionally defined as someone who speaks English as his or her native language or mother tongue." According to Cambridge Dictionary, "native speaker" refers to "someone who has spoken a particular language since they were a baby, rather than having learned it as a child or adult (native speaker, 2018)." Cook (1999) further describes this definition, pointing out the key element of the native speaker is the language learnt first. Other characteristics, such as how well the person uses the language, are incidental. Therefore, the term "native speaker" is closely related to the infant period the first language is learnt, rather than individuals' language proficiency. Under this circumstance, it is not applicable to consider NESTs as teachers who speak standard English.

Actually, the simplistic dichotomy of NEST and NNEST may not be able to represent the varied linguistic and cultural experiences of millions of English teachers (Motha, Jain & Tecle, as cited in Blum and Johnson, 2012) and the popularity of world Englishes. The boundaries between nativeness and non-nativeness are blurred, and some researchers have discovered ambiguities in the dichotomy (Medgyes, 2001; Butler, 2007). Davies (1991) refers that if a person was born in an English-speaking country but grows up in a country that is dominated by another language, he/she may speak English with an accent (e.g. a person who was born in the UK and grew up in China may speak 'Chinglish'). From Medgyes's (2001) perspective, even for people who speak English as their first language, they may also have a variety of dialects with different accents in different countries and regions. According to Hugh, Trudgill and Watt (2013), there are 23 different dialects in various areas of the British Isles, where people have quite distinct accents. These dialects linguistically and geographically indicate regional variation. Therefore, NESTs and people who can speak English without any accents (e.g. Received Pronunciation) may be two separate concepts that should be differentiated.

Secondly, it should be recognised teachers' accent is not directly related to students' English language acquisition. In terms of comprehension, although some scholars such as Eisenstein and Berkowitz (as cited in Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta & Balasubramanian, 2002) argue ESL (English as a second language) learners can understand accent-less English more easily than either foreign-accented English or working-class New York English, there are many scholars suggesting no significant links between teachers' accents and listening comprehension of students (Munro & Derwing, 1995; Butler, 2007). For instance, Butler (2007) fails to find any differences in students' performance regarding comprehension whether they were taught by teachers with accents or not (Butler, 2007). Similarly, Munro and Derwing (1995, p. 285) discover the little empirical relationship between the non-native accent and intelligibility. The notions of 'heavy accent' and 'low intelligibility' had often been confounded. Besides, Flowerdew (as cited in Major et al., 2002) suggests that students possess difficulties in comprehending accents that they are not familiar with, regardless of whether the accents are native or non-native. With regards to students' pronunciation, Griffen (as cited in Munro & Derwing 1995, p. 287) states "the goal of instruction in pronunciation is that students should learn to speak the language as naturally as possible, free of any indication that the speaker is not a clinically normal native." Practically, IELTS (International English Language Testing System), which serves as an international standardised English test for international studies, immigration and work, does not require candidates to use a standard accent (e.g. Received

Pronunciation) in the speaking test, even for proficient users. For instance, IELTS speaking descriptors for candidate at Band 8 as proficient users only require pronunciation "is easy to understand throughout; first language (L1) accent has minimal effect on intelligibility (Ielts.org, 2018, p. 1)". In this case, accent is not the only determinant factor for students to be a successful English learner, and teachers' accent may not be the most crucial factor that impacts their students' English language learning. Therefore, we should seriously take into consideration other important issues that may contribute to language learning, for example, language teaching quality, language learning strategies and the appropriateness of curriculum and pedagogy.

Thirdly, although Blum and Johnson (2012) assert the discrimination of NNESTs is undesirable and unadvisable, they do not indicate an ideal set of criteria for teacher evaluation. For instance, scholars like Seldin (1984) report the key point for a good teacher is to be able to communicate with students effectively. Cheung (as cited in Briane, 2005) states that good teachers can not only motivate and encourage students by combining learning with fun but also can respect their individuality and personality. Moreover, Azer (2005) lists 12 qualities for a good teacher that could be generalised into their commitments, rapport with students, teaching skills, critical thinking and cooperation. In my opinion, these criteria are theoretically advisable, but it is noteworthy to remember that there are no perfect teachers who can master all these aforementioned qualities. It is a mistake to treat NESTs as the "arbiters of proper pedagogy" with remarkable teaching abilities (Widdowson, 1994, p. 387). Fairly speaking, teacher's pedagogical competence and linguistic flexibility rather than NEST/NNEST status should be paid more attention to. In specific, NESTs and NNESTs have their unique advantages, and they are potentially capable teachers because their respective strengths and weaknesses balance each other out (Medgyes, 2001). On the one side, according to Ma and Ping (2012), NESTs may have high proficiency in English and the command to use English appropriately. They have more awareness of the cultures of English-speaking countries (Ma & Ping, 2012). On the other side, as mentioned above, NNESTs can easily anticipate and understand their students' difficulties, provide first-hand solutions on account of their own learning experiences, have high proficiency in students' L1 (Blum & Johnson, 2012; Ma & Ping, 2012). Besides, learning at least one foreign language and its corresponding culture will be beneficial for students engaging with various cultures (Velasco-Martin, 2004). Therefore, the balance and collaboration between NESTs and NNESTs, who complement each other in their advantages and shortcomings, are essential in an ideal English-teaching environment.

Fourthly, a more in-depth exploration into discrimination of NNESTs is necessary. Discrimination may be partly attributed to people's ideology and stereotypes. "Ideology does not mean political ideology, but the particular system of beliefs and assumptions that underlie every linguistic analysis and every social event" (Stockwell, 2002, p. 72), and stereotypes refer to an individual's set of beliefs about the characteristics or attributes of a group (Judd & Park, 1993). With regard to people's ideology and stereotypes toward NESTs and NNESTs, Tang (1997) reports that there is a generally held belief that NESTs are superior to NNESTs in Hong Kong, and Takada and Luk (1997) states that parents in Japan doubt the abilities of NNESTs and they are reluctant to accept them. In China, "the policymakers in China seem to adhere strictly to a belief that the native speakers of English are the best teachers and English-speaking countries set the standards (Pan, 2011, p. 255)." Some parents tend to choose teachers who are from English-speaking countries for their children rather than local teachers. This type of ideology and stereotype toward NNESTs will intensify the discrimination and marginalisation of NNESTs. Additionally, the reasons for discrimination might be differences in social power, and there may be privileges for the power elite if the standard variety of English is provided

(Coulma, 2013). The linguistic discrimination might evolve into social discrimination that worsens social inequality.

Finally, regarding the methodology involved in Blum and Johnson's (2012) article, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which represents an approach to research the social changes through understanding how ideology mediates language use, has been integrally mentioned. Blum and Johnson (2012) state that CDA contributes to our better understanding of the importance of ideology in language use and analyse how dominated groups and the associated ideology affect public opinions. This methodology derives from a sociocultural and sociolinguistic perspective that the meaning and representation of language are not isolated but influenced by social and cultural factors. Therefore, CDA is beneficial for our comprehensive understanding of the debate between NEST and NNEST as well as its reasons. However, although Blum and Johnson's (2012) use CDA for analysing, emphasising its importance and typically present the influences of media as well as policymakers, they avoid the reasons why media and policymakers mainly voice the dominant groups' actions and minds. van Dijk (2003) defines CDA as a type of discourse analysis that is related to social power abuse, dominance and inequality in text and talk in different social and political contexts. He highlights the dominating group members mainly control social resources, so they can turn media into their tools that represent their will and positions, and force policymakers to make laws they prefer (van Dijk, 1995). In addition, Blum and Johnson (2012) only introduce the viewpoints of van Dijk (2003) and neglect other sides of CDA research. For instance, one of the most important standpoints from Stubbs (1997) is that CDA should base on firmer empirical research and ethnographic study rather than the case in many contemporary studies. He criticises the use of a small amount of data for supporting analysts' viewpoints and emphasises the necessity of valid and explicit interpretation of data such as how texts affect people's beliefs and values. Obviously, compared with van Dijk's (2003) perspective, Stubbs (1997) offers a broader way to envisage texts and data. Therefore, we should consider more comprehensively and deeply when we analyse texts by using this method.

Conclusion

Blum and Johnson's contribution to the debate on NESTs and NNESTs has theoretical and practical value for further research. The authors advocate diversity in language, culture and the rights of NNESTs. However, some important issues like (1) the correlation between NNESTs and teachers who have accents, (2) the link between teacher's accents and student's performance, (3) the solutions to address the discrimination towards NNESTs, and (4) the evaluation of English teachers have not been fully clarified in this article. In the future, we should objectively analyse accents that both NESTs and NNESTs have and assess the influence on learner's language development. Moreover, the distinction between NESTs and NNESTs should not be regarded as the only criterion when governors and administrators hire employees. The criteria for teacher evaluation must be perfected and should focus on levels of professionalism and collective cooperation rather than on ethnicity or linguistic background. Additionally, policies and laws against discrimination should be put forward and published by governments in due course.

References

Azer, S. A. (2005). The qualities of a good teacher: How can they be acquired and sustained? *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine,* 98(2), pp. 67-69.

Blum, A., & Johnson, E. J. (2012) Reading repression: Textualizing the linguistic marginalization of nonnative English-speaking teachers in Arizona. *Journal of Language, Identity and Education,* 11(3), pp. 167-184.

Braine, G. (2005). A history of research on non-native speaker English teachers. In Llurda, E (ed). *Non-Native Language Teachers*. New York: Springer

Butler, Y. G. (2007). How are nonnative English-speaking teachers perceived by young learners? *TESOL Quarterly,* 41 (4), pp. 731-755.

Canagarajah, A. S. (1999). "Interrogating the "Native Speaker Fallacy": Non-linguistic roots, non-pedagogical results. *Nonnative educators in English Language Teaching,* (ed). London: Routledge.

Cook, V. (1999). Going beyond the native speaker in language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, *33*(2), pp. 185-209.

Coulmas, F. (2013). *Sociolinguistics: The Study of Speakers' Choices.* 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Davies, A. (1991). *The Native Speaker in Applied Linguistics.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Holliday, A. (2005). *The Struggle to Teach English as an International Language*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Hughes, A., Trudgill, P., & Watt, D. (2013). *English Accents and Dialects: An Introduction to Social and Regional Varieties of English in the British Isles*. London: Routledge.

Ielts.org. (2018). [online] Available at: https://www.ielts.org/-/media/pdfs/speaking-band-descriptors.ashx?la=en [Accessed 25 Apr. 2018].

Judd, C. M., & Park, B. (1993). Definition and assessment of accuracy in social stereotypes. *Psychological Review*, *100*(1), pp. 109-128.

Kamhi-Stein, L. (1999). Preparing non-native professionals in TESOL: Implications for teacher educations programs. In G. Braine (Ed.), *Non-native Educators in English Language Teaching*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Lippi-Green, R. (2012). *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology and Discrimination in the United States*. New York:Routledge.

Ma, F., & Ping, L. (2012). Advantages and disadvantages of native-and nonnative-English-speaking teachers: Student perceptions in Hong Kong. *TESOL Quarterly*, *46*(2), pp. 280-305.

Major, R. C., Fitzmaurice, S.F., Bunta, F. and Balasubramanian, C. (2002). The effects of nonnative accents on listening comprehension: Implications for ESL assessment. *TESOL Quarterly,* 36(2). pp. 173-190.

Medgyes, P. (1994). *The Non-native Teacher*. London, UK: MacMillan.

Medgyes, P. (2001) When the teacher is a non-native speaker. *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*, 3, pp. 429-442.

Munro, M. J., & Derwing, T. M. (1995). Foreign accent, comprehensibility, and intelligibility in the speech of second language learners. *Language Learning,* 45(1) pp. 73-97.

Native speaker. (n.d.). In Cambridge dictionary. Retrieved from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/native-speaker.

Paikeday, T. M. (1985). The Native Speaker Is Dead! An Informal Discussion of a Linguistic Myth with Noam Chomsky and Other Linguists, *Philosophers, Psychologists, And Lexicographers*, Toronto: Paikeday.

Pan, L. (2011). English language ideologies in the Chinese foreign language education policies: A world-system perspective. *Language Policy,* 10(3), pp. 245-263.

Phillipson, R.(1992). *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Quirk, R. (1961). *The Study of the Mother-Tongue: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at University College, London*. London, UK: Lewis.

Received Pronunciation [Def.1]. (2018). In *Cambridge Dcitonary*, Retrieved from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/received-pronunciation?q=Received%2BPronunciation.

Santana-Williamson, E. (2002). ESL students' attitudes toward native and non-native speaking instructors' accents. *CATESOL Journal*, 14(1), pp. 57-72.

Seldin, P.(1984). *Changing Practices in Faculty Evaluation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Stockwell, P. (2002). *Sociolinguistics: A Resource Book for Students.* 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Stubbs, M. (1997). Whorf's children: Critical comments on critical discourse analysis (CDA). *British Studies in Applied Linguistics,* 12, pp. 100-116.

Tang, C. (1997). On the power and status of nonnative ESL teachers. *TESOL Quarterly,* 31, 577–580.

Tauroza, S., & Luk, J. (1997). Accent and second language listening comprehension. *RELC Journal*, 28, 54–71.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1995). Aims of critical discourse analysis. *Japanese Discourse*, 1(1), pp. 17-28.

van Dijk, T. A. (2003). Critical discourse analysis. In Schiffrin, D., Tannen, D. and E.Hamilton,H (ed). *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Velasco-Martin, C. (2004). The nonnative English-speaking teacher as an intercultural speaker. In L.D. Kamhi-Stein (ed). *Learning and Teaching from Experience: Perspectives on Nonnative English-Speaking Professionals*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Widdowson, H. G. (1994). The ownership of English. *TESOL Quarterly*, 28(2): 377–389.