

Becoming a Non-Native Speaking Teacher:

Reflections as an American Teacher of Japanese in an Australian High School

Michael Ellis

International Christian University High School

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of nuance in the dichotomy between NESTs (native English speaking teachers) and NNESTs (non-native English speaking teachers). However, even as the complex definition of a native speaker is scrutinized and explored, it can still be difficult for those who identify unambiguously as a NEST or NNEST to understand the strengths and challenges of the other group. As a NEST from the US, I had a chance to bridge this gap when offered the opportunity to teach Japanese language classes in an Australian high school. Over a two week period, I taught beginner level classes to three groups of thirty 7th graders and one group of twelve 8th graders. In this paper I offer reflections on the experience and explain how it influenced my English teaching practice by helping me to better understand the position of NNESTs in Japan.

The native speaker fallacy, also known as native speakerism, is one of the most pervasive problems in language education, especially English language education today (Holliday, 2006). This fallacy is the false notion that native speaking teachers (NSTs) of a target language are inherently better equipped than non-native speaking teachers (NNESTs), regardless of experience or qualifications (Canagarajah, 1999). English education in Japan reflects native speakerism in the jobs that native speaking English teachers (NESTs) and non-native speaking English teachers (NNESTs) tend to be offered and their relative status (Houghton & Rivers, 2013).

In recent years, this fallacy has been challenged as we better comprehend the strengths and value of experiences of NNESTs, as well as the difficulty in accurately defining nativeness. As a result of globalization, it is more and more common for people to speak multiple languages natively, or to achieve contextual nativeness. A child who grows up in a Japanese speaking family while attending English language international school in China for example, may be quite proficient in Japanese for daily conversation and English for academics, but struggle with the reverse. Furthermore, many foreign language learners study to an advanced level and become functionally native, indicating that nativeness is not a clear and simple binary as was previously believed. However, even as we better understand the nuance of nativeness, it can be difficult for teachers who identify unambiguously as NSTs or NNESTs to fully appreciate the skills and struggles common to the other group.

I was offered a rare opportunity to bridge this NST and NNEST gap when I, an unambiguous American NEST, taught Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) classes at an Australian high school. In this study, I reflect on this experience and what it helped me understand about NNESTs in Japan.

My Language Learning and Teaching Background

In order to contextualize my reflections as a JFL teacher on this program, it will be useful to quickly review my background as a language learner and teacher, and to examine how this experience has shaped my views on a teacher's nativeness in the target language over time. I identify three distinct phases in the evolution of these views.

Full on native-speakerism: Student of Various Languages

The first phase is when I studied foreign languages at high school and university. In six years of French studies, I had four different teachers. All were NNESTs and three had PhDs in French language or education. In four years of Spanish studies, I had four different teachers. To my knowledge, none had higher degrees, but all were NSTs from Spain or various places in Latin America. Although I recognized that the French teachers were all experienced, qualified and capable, I would have preferred NSTs, and was grateful to be taught by NSTs in my Spanish classes, though I understood even at the time that on average they were not as skilled as my French teachers. I cannot explain the reasoning for this preference. It just seemed natural to assume that NSTs were inherently *better* teachers. I knew at this time that I wanted to pursue a career as a language teacher, and chose English by default as I was not confident I could achieve native level proficiency in any other language. At university, most of the Japanese classes were taught by NSTs, but there was at least one section taught by a NNEST, and I was relieved to not have been placed there. There were no NSTs of Latin, but if there were I am sure I would have requested to join that class. At this time, I subscribed enthusiastically to the native speaker fallacy, even as a student conscious and critical of foreign language teaching practice.

Relaxing prejudices: ALT and Eikaiwa

I began to question native speakerism when I started teaching language myself. My first full time teaching job was as an ALT at a junior high school in Miyagi prefecture through the JET Program. I had studied mainly theoretical linguistics at university and had very little training in teaching. Despite this, the Japanese teachers I worked with all treated me as an expert in the field and gave me more credit than I felt I deserved, particularly in front of the students. It was not uncommon, for example, for a teacher to give me free, unvetted rein over a full class or two each week even when I had only a basic understanding of the curriculum and effective teaching methodology. Some of this behavior may have resulted from politeness, laziness or a combination of the two, but it still alerted me early on to my privileged position as a NNEST.

My understanding of this position deepened when I moved to Tokyo two years later and began working at an

eikaiwa school. This school had simple posters to introduce the teachers by the doorway. It troubled me how the Japanese NNESTs were introduced with their language learning background and qualifications, while the NESTs were introduced with our interests and hobbies. NESTs were also forbidden from ever using Japanese during class for any reason. In this context, I felt constrained as a NEST rather than privileged. My background and skills were irrelevant, or at least secondary to my NEST status. During this time, my native speakerism began to relax, but I still thought that the ideal teacher is a NST, but only one with proper training and a healthy amount of autonomy.

Conceptual understanding but lack of empathy: Masters program and high school EFL

Simultaneous to entering the eikaiwa school, I began pursuing an MA TESOL degree. In a compulsory course on classroom practices, our teacher introduced literature on the native speaker fallacy. I also had brilliant NNEST classmates who helped to show me the potential of all educators, regardless of nativeness. Around this time, I developed a conceptual understanding that native-speakerism is wrong but lacked empathy for NNESTs and the tools to address the inequality in our field. The high school where I started teaching at this time had strict teacher categories of native (all non-Japanese NESTs), bilingual (all Japanese NESTs who have studied as children in English speaking environments) and grammar (all Japanese NSTs). Though these categories felt limiting to me based on my experience and training, I did nothing to push back against them. This passive attitude changed through my experience teaching JFL, when I entered a fourth phase.

The Program

In the summer of 2018, I chaperoned ten 10th and 11th grade students from our high school on a study abroad program to a public school in New South Wales, Australia. For three weeks, the students lived with Australian families and attended school daily. In addition to normal classes, they had two hours of ESL every morning, taught by the coordinating teacher at the school. This teacher was an Australian teacher of Japanese language and her normal morning classes were disrupted by these ESL classes during this time. I offered to cover the Japanese classes that she missed and she enthusiastically accepted.

I taught beginner level classes to three groups of thirty 7th graders and one group of twelve 8th graders, a total of eight 70-minute lessons. The goals of these classes were to enable students to use basic Japanese grammar and vocabulary and understand important features of Japanese culture. I was given broad topics to teach, such as weather, numbers 101 through 1000, particles *kara* (from) and *made* (to/until), and complete autonomy in my approach. In the following section, I identify and explain five key reflections that came up during this program.

Reflections

Reflection 1: Students are often interested in their teachers as individuals, regardless of nationality or nativeness

I planned to use the first five minutes of the first class with each set of students for general question and answer time about Japanese culture and my life there. Anticipating questions about obscure parts of Japanese culture, I reviewed a travel guide the day before to brush up. I was conscious of my non-nativeness and concerned about coming across as a knowledgeable ambassador. The students were so excited to ask the questions, we ended up using about 15 minutes in each class. The following list is a representative sample of the kinds of questions that they asked.

- Did you leave America because of Trump?
- Did you leave America because of all the shootings?
- Do you think in English or in Japanese?
- What's the weirdest thing about Japan?
- What's your favorite thing about Australia?
- Can you do an Australian accent?

Surprisingly few questions related to Japanese language or culture at all, and a significant number were just about Australia. In reality, the students seemed to be much more interested in me and my lived experiences, to the point that I had to nudge them to ask questions about Japan. This is encouraging to NNESTs, as it demonstrates that we do not necessarily need to be experts in the target language culture to engage our students.

Reflection 2: Students aren't always as interested in learning the target language as we hope

The students in the compulsory classes had not chosen to study Japanese but were randomly placed into Japanese or Chinese language classes. As such, the level of motivation varied widely. Behavior and classroom management were constant issues, confounded by my limited experience with large unruly classes. For this reason, I particularly enjoyed teaching the smaller, 8th grade elective class for students who chose to continue their Japanese studies from the previous year. Even in this class however, behavior was a problem. One student constantly spoke to her classmates about unrelated topics during the lesson. I assumed that she took the class not because of an interest in learning Japanese, but rather a lack of alternatives. However, during our last class, I happened to see her notebook full of beautiful illustrations of various aspects of Japanese culture (see Figure 1).

This sparked a conversation after class about the specific places she hopes to visit and things she hopes to do, see and eat there. Learning the language does not seem to be a priority for her, but that does not mean that she has no interest in the target language culture. As a linguist this way of thinking was quite surprising to me, but it is perfectly sensible. Students' interests are not

limited to the target language, so a teacher's status as a NNST in no way hinders our ability to connect with students about those goals. In some ways it may actually help, as in a lesson I describe in the third reflection.

Figure 1: Student notebook with illustrations about Japanese culture



Reflection 3: As NNSTs, we can relate to our students as models of their ideal L2 selves

I practice photography as a hobby and tend to carry my DSLR camera with me everywhere I go. When introducing new vocabulary in these classes, I used slideshows with high resolution pictures I had taken in various parts of Japan, which often led to anecdotal stories about my travels and experiences. The students reacted very positively to this. It was my feeling that they felt a stronger connection to the target language and concepts because they were introduced to them through my eyes as a NNST. I expect that images from a textbook, or even from a NST would not have elicited the same reaction, as the connection to the students' lives would be weaker. If I can climb Mt Fuji or brave Tokyo commuter trains as evidenced with photographs, what's stopping them from doing the same one day?

On the last day of the program, one student in the elective class asked me some detailed questions about how I began working and living in Japan. This student had stood out as the strongest in that class, with her quick retention of target vocabulary and grammar, and astute questions about Japanese linguistic rules. She reminded me a bit of myself as a language learner, so I was thrilled to hear that she might be interested in pursuing a similar career. In this case, my status as a NNST helped a student by providing a model that she may follow one day.

Reflection 4: We can be better at explaining the target language than we realize

The night before the first class, I knew that I was going to get tricky questions about the intricate usage of particles *ha* and *ga*, a topic which troubles even advanced learners of Japanese. I was wrong, and most of the questions that the students asked were well within my ability to explain. Based on my experience teaching in English grammar, I reminded myself to not hesitate to say "I don't know. Let me check and get back to you tomorrow." when confronted with tough questions. Surprising to me, this was never necessary, and I actually found myself more comfortable answering the students' questions about Japanese grammar than I generally am about English.

This is likely because I had used a similar textbook to consciously learn those same rules as an adult. In this way, I could speak with authority about tricks and advice for learning the target language, unlike in my English classes which require more deliberate effort to sympathize with EFL students.

Reflection 5: Good teaching is good teaching

Although I made many mistakes in these classes and would love the opportunity to do everything over once more, this experience taught me that ultimately good teaching practice is good teaching practice, regardless of the course content or teacher's nativeness. During this program, I was able to utilize many of the tools and principles that I have cultivated in my English classes, such as needs analysis, explicit goals and assessment, task authenticity and variety, maximization of student interaction, and reflection. Though I have taught some content classes in Japan, the main goal has always been English language, so I feared that I would start from square one in a Japanese class. Luckily this was not the case. As teachers, our skills are readily transferable to different course content.

Conclusions

Some readers may find these reflections obvious. In retrospect, many are things that I understood intellectually before this opportunity but did not fully appreciate. It frustrates me that I had to personally experience work as a NNST to develop a level of empathy for NNSTs in Japan. I hope that this study can substitute as an experience for other NESTs like me to better understand the positions of NNSTs.

Since this program, I have taken an active role in weakening the boundaries between the categories of teachers at our school. This year, for the first time, we hired a new "bilingual" teacher who was educated in Japanese, and only studied in English at graduate school. Normally, a teacher with this background would only be considered for a "grammar" teacher position. However, in the short time that she has been here, she has contributed a great deal to the program with her fresh perspective unique from the NESTs in the team. We are now actively discussing how to further blur the lines between these categories in the future. I hope to keep drawing on this experience as a NNST of JFL to continue diversifying the teachers in our English program and utilizing our individual strengths to the fullest.

References

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Author Bio

Michael Ellis is the EFL program coordinator at International Christian University High School. He is interested in teachers' reflective practice among many other topics, and is currently program chair of TD SIG.

maikeru.desu@gmail.com

The Teacher Development SIG at PanSIG 2021

Developing an Intercultural Understanding as Teachers

Friday, May 14, 19:00-20:30

Language teaching involves a commitment to, and interest in, intercultural communication. In providing language learning instruction, practitioners are not merely sharing linguistic knowledge and skills in a one-directional manner, but are continuously negotiating and learning from their students' dynamic experiences, repertoires, and identities. As English is a lingua franca, which facilitates communication across cultures, a sensitivity to the intricacies of interaction between groups from different speech backgrounds is essential. In an era characterised by division and remoteness, language educators' roles have become even more paramount in upholding and promoting intercultural mindsets. However, these skills may be overlooked or complicated to build and hone.

This forum is a collaboration between the Teacher Development (TD) and Intercultural Communication in Language Education (ICLE) SIGs. Featuring a panel of invited speakers from the SIGs, each presenter will explore a different element of what developing intercultural practice, understanding, and principles as a foreign language educator entails. Following the presentations, the panellists will interact about points of interest and resonance, and there will be an opportunity for audience participants to share their reflections and contribute to the dialogue. It is hoped that this session will provide guidance for developing intercultural teaching approaches and language learning environments.

Invited speakers:

Prof. Helen Spencer-Oatey (University of Warwick & GlobalPeople Consulting Ltd.)

Prof. Stephen R. Ryan (Sanyo Gakuen University)

Prof. Yoko Munezane (Rikkyo University)

