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Teaching Pronunciation as a NNEST in an Intensive English Program in the U.S.: A Professional Journey

Parul Sood
University of Kansas

Background

I am a nonnative English-speaking teacher (NNEST) in an English language program at a Midwestern University in the U.S. I was born and raised as a bilingual in India. I spoke Hindi at home and began learning English in school. India is a linguistically diverse country, but because of its colonial legacy, English is considered as an important part of Indian higher education and is usually seen as the language of power and prestige. English was spoken by the ruling British government, so the laws were written in English, and the government administration was also conducted in English. Additionally, English became the medium of instruction in public schools. After India gained independence from the British, the Constitution of India named both Hindi and English as the official languages of India. Thanks to the foresight and liberal ideas of the then national leaders, most Indians who now graduate from a university have a good functional knowledge of general English, which is expectedly influenced by the local language(s), resulting in Indian English.

Upon graduating with a bachelor's degree in elementary education, I moved to the United States and started working toward getting a master's degree in education with an emphasis in TESOL. I started working at the Applied English Center (AEC) at the University of Kansas as a lecturer in 2012 after spending a year as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA). The AEC is an English language center that houses the Intensive English Program (IEP) among other language programs and courses for nonnative English-speaking students at the University of Kansas. In the IEP, there are five levels of instruction and two main classes in the curriculum for every level: Reading/Writing/Grammar (RWG) and Listening/Speaking/Grammar (LSG). Over the years, I have taught all language skills at different levels.

Earlier on in my career, I taught a Grammar for Communication class where grammar was taught separately from reading and writing. I spent a great deal of time learning the rules and how to teach them concisely to students. Although I received my education in English, I did not have much grammatical instruction in school. At that time, grammar was "caught and not taught" at school because the focus was on the whole language philosophy, which de-emphasized grammar instruction. I must admit that I valued learning the grammar charts myself first and then finding a way to teach them in the classroom.

Eventually I moved on to teaching integrated RWG classes. My educational background in TESOL helped me gain knowledge in second language teaching methodology and second language acquisition theories for teaching these skills at an IEP. Because of positive feedback from peers and my students, I felt confident as an RWG teacher. Watching my students making progress and advancing in their language learning journeys motivated me. I enjoyed being a successful RWG teacher, so I mostly requested a teaching assignment that included teaching reading and writing as I wanted to continue doing something I was good at. Being a nonnative speaker, I assumed that I would not be seen as an adequate speaking teacher in an LSG class.

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Embarking Upon My Journey as a Pronunciation Teacher

At the IEP where I teach, all ESL instructors are expected to teach any skill at any level. This policy eventually required me to teach speaking skills, including pronunciation. I was very hesitant at the beginning and did not know where to start. I decided to talk to other experienced LSG instructors about the curriculum and teaching strategies. The student learning objectives (SLOs) in the LSG classes are mainly based on developing listening and speaking skills. Pronunciation and grammar are a part of the curriculum but are not as specifically articulated. I got useful tips and teaching materials by collaborating with experienced colleagues, which gave me a starting point. I was less confident but ready to work hard. I decided to break the curriculum into parts or categories that I could more easily grasp. One successful strategy that I have always relied on is to understand how a particular topic or exercise fits into the curriculum and why we are working on it. This bigger picture perspective helps me orient my instruction and more effectively teach my students.

As time went on, I felt increasingly confident with the LSG curriculum. The grammar aspect of the class was the same as in the RWG class, so I focused more on teaching to the speaking and listening SLOs. I realized that I had taught all these skills before in some way in an RWG class. Examples include notetaking, expressing likes/dislikes or opinions, explaining graphs, giving presentations, summarizing, and using markers to compare or contrast or show cause and effect. I felt my task was to find ways to help my students learn how to listen for or recognize these ways of using English as well as to help them develop the required skills. I focused on finding good examples for in-class practice exercises. Reading aloud, which is a significant component of my reading class, worked well in an LSG class, as well. Regular sessions of reading aloud with engaging content provided opportunities for me to model fluency and inflection. Over time, I observed students really enjoying my LSG classes, and I also began to enjoy teaching these classes more. However, one aspect that was and is still challenging for me to teach is pronunciation. I do not think I teach it as well as the other parts of the curriculum because my first language was not English.

Challenges of Teaching English Pronunciation as a Nonnative English-Speaking Teacher (NNEST)

I avoided teaching an LSG class even though I am an experienced ESL teacher because I felt a lack of confidence while teaching pronunciation. The question that stayed in mind was that even with a solid understanding of teaching methodology, was I speaking English "competently" like my native English-speaking colleagues? In other words, are native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) more capable language teachers in comparison to NNESTs? The answer to my question begins with understanding the native-nonnative dichotomy.

Native-Nonnative Teacher Dichotomy

In the profession of English language teaching, a preference for native speakers has traditionally been based on the assumption that native speakers are the ideal teachers of English. For an example of an explicit statement for the preference for native speakers of English, see Braine (2010, pp. 3-4). However, it is not easy to define the term *native speaker* because being a native speaker cannot be determined by considering only the place of birth or even the first language (Phillipson, 1992). Emphasizing the language user, Duran and Saenkhum (2022) noted how English has spread worldwide due to colonial developments and globalization, and as a result there are culturally, ethnically, and racially diversified users of English. "English users are now found in every continent whether or not they acquire English as their first language" (Duran & Saenkhum, 2022, p.3). Phillipson challenges the legitimacy of the native speaker concept, asserting that there is no scientific evidence to support it. He refers to this idea as the "native speaker fallacy," suggesting it stems from the assumption that native speakers are more skilled in "demonstrating fluent, idiomatically appropriate language" (p. 194). However, he argues that such skills can be acquired by nonnative teachers. Phillipson emphasizes that effective teachers are made through training and experience, regardless of their native language background.

Phillipson's ideology resonates with me because when I first started teaching, I had the knowledge I acquired through teacher training programs but did not have much experience. I was not a native speaker but was considered

proficient in English based on my high TOEFL score and a perfect score on the institutional version of the Test of Spoken English called the Speaking Proficiency English Assessment Kit or SPEAK Test, a test given to assess the oral language proficiency of nonnative speakers of English who are applying for graduate teaching assistantship (GTA) positions at some universities. When I first started as a GTA, I mostly used the material that was created by my mentors or the coordinators of that course. Over the years, I observed other experienced colleagues in the classroom, and I borrowed teaching methodology, along with ideas, strategies, and activities from them. All this training in my early years helped me become the teacher that I am today. Regardless of my native language, I got trained to teach the *English* language. Based on my personal experience in the field, including my documented high degree of proficiency, I can say that professional preparation is more important than being a native speaker. Professional preparation enables both native and nonnative speaking teachers to assess and develop pedagogical practices based on expertise, knowledge, and experience.

Perceptions or Misperceptions?

My self-perception about having a different accent, pronunciation, and sometimes vocabulary initially contributed to my lack of confidence as a pronunciation teacher. I felt anxious about my communication abilities in English because I thought that my students would be skeptical about my teaching ability, especially at the beginning of the semester, given my non-white physical appearance and my nonnative accent. It was my perception that NNESTs are generally believed to have inadequate knowledge of the English language and are being constantly judged against the native speaker norm. This made me wonder if I should perhaps attempt to mimic a native speaker of American English in the classroom. Research has shown that a teacher's past classroom experiences, current professional status, and their career aspirations can significantly impact how strongly they identify with native speakers and their desire to achieve a native-like accent (Jenkins, 2005). A more recent study done by Coşkun (2013) also reported that non-native EFL teachers are uncertain about their accents and language proficiency in general. Although they are aware of their strengths, they feel less powerful in the classroom. This explains why I wanted to sound like my white-American peers.

This lack of confidence and these feelings of insecurity are probably related to self-perceived language ability rather than actual language proficiency. In fact, this perception was articulated in Rajagopalan (2005) who revealed that NNESTs' self-perception of English proficiency, rather than their actual English abilities, plays a key role in establishing their confidence in teaching.

Since I have a terminal degree in my profession and have successfully taught ESL for the last 12 years at an American University, I finally decided to change my attitude about my Indian accent and now believe that it does not reflect my language ability or ability to teach English well. Given that self-confidence is an essential component for successful teaching, it was important for me to have a positive self-perception about my language proficiency. To compensate for this difference, not deficiency, I have focused more on preparation and planning for my classes, as I believe that good teaching practice does not depend on being native or nonnative but rather depends on being well prepared. I believe the reason I have not received any student complaints about my accent or comprehensibility is that I have paid careful attention to the speed, clarity, and volume of my speech in the classroom and have always aimed for overall intelligibility, a goal of good instructors in all disciplines.

In the past, whenever I taught an LSG class, I started with an assumption that my students would not consider me a good speaking teacher because I do not speak the language like other American teachers. To my surprise, this was not how my students saw me in the classroom. My course evaluations reflected that they accepted me and liked my approach to teaching LSG. While students position me as an NNEST, they also value my expertise, the way I teach, and my dedication to the profession. To illustrate, students are resoundingly positive in their evaluation of my LSG classes. They write comments like, "*The course is very clear, so I can understand very easily*" and "*I like the class (and) that I can speak my opinion freely.*" I believe my students also see me as an example of a successful learner of English. In class they consistently ask me questions like "*When did you start learning English*?" or "*How long did it take you to become proficient*?" They want me to share my experiences and strategies for learning English. As nonnative English-speaking teachers, we have already experienced the process of learning a language, which helps us provide valuable insights and a venue for empathizing with our students.

Looking deeper into the research confirmed my beliefs. Coşkun (2013) notes that NNESTs are likely to understand the learners' challenges and problems better and share empathy with them. A study done by McKay (2003) also

reported that nonnative English-speaking teachers may be better at identifying and understanding the challenges faced by their students when learning English, potentially because they themselves have experienced similar difficulties as learners of the language, leading to greater empathy. Furthermore, Cook (1999) argued that multilingual teachers are more qualified than their monolingual counterparts, as "students may feel overwhelmed by native speaker teachers who have achieved a perfection that is out of the students' reach" (p. 200). Cook's (1999) idea was that students might prefer nonnative teachers because they provide a model that feels more achievable to learners. Therefore, as NNESTs, we need to be aware of how students may perceive our status, our role, and our contribution to the educational process. We need to recognize that students need to be aware of and exposed to other varieties of English, both "native" and "nonnative," as they can encounter either in the current globalized context. It is also important for teacher education programs to develop courses and materials for teachers to raise this awareness and make NNESTs aware of their potential to be successful and valued language teachers. Simply put, NNESTs offer unique advantages to the profession. Being a native English speaker is not as important as learning how to use the language effectively to engage with students and help them develop their knowledge of the English language.

Understandability or Native-like Pronunciation: What's the Goal?

For some teachers, the goal is to help students communicate a clear message, but other instructors find it a bit uncomfortable to leave students' "mistakes" uncorrected even if the message was clear. I have always questioned the importance of traditional "native-like" pronunciation over understandability.[1] When our students move on to take non-ESL classes at the university, their comprehensibility not only depends on their pronunciation but also on their familiarity with the topic of discussion (Chung & Miki Bong, 2019) and faculty attitudes toward "nonnative" English speech (Sheppard, Elliot, and Baese-Birk, 2017). Additionally, the comprehensibility of English language learners (ELLs) is greatly influenced by the willingness of other students to actively listen, understand, and support their speech, creating a comfortable environment where all participants cooperate in the communicative act.

Attitudes and goals of ("nonnative") English language users are also relevant. Around the world, many nonnative speakers use English as a tool for communication. These English language speakers may not have, need, or want an American English accent or "perfect" pronunciation when communicating with others in English. A goal of U.S. English language programs at the university level is to prepare students to be successful in their academic classes at the university. However, attaining this goal does not necessarily require that students become native-like in English, including in their pronunciation. Learners should focus their efforts on being clear and intelligible enough to facilitate understanding and smooth communication. But does this mean that teachers should put *no* importance on helping students strive for native-like pronunciation?

Pronunciation teaching has been influenced by two contradicting principles. Levis (2005) reports that the *nativeness* principle is to teach or learn a native-like pronunciation in foreign language teaching. In contrast, Levis' (2005) *intelligibility* principle states that pronunciation teaching and learning should focus on making learners produce speech that is "understandable" or "intelligible," regardless of how native-like it sounds. He further argues that striving to perfectly mimic a native speaker's accent is often unrealistic for most learners and may result in discouragement. He emphasizes that the priority should be clear communication and being understood, rather than achieving "native-like" pronunciation, highlighting that such fluency is not essential for effective communication. Although the nativeness principle and the intelligibility principle differ with respect to goals for student success and qualifications of teachers, they are not completely incompatible. Both approaches agree that pronunciation is important for language teaching. Therefore, in my opinion, we as teachers should take a balanced approach to lead students to set more realistic and pragmatic pronunciation goals while acknowledging a role for native-speaker pronunciation in our curricula and teaching materials.

Lack of Training

Another challenge of teaching pronunciation was a lack of guidance and adequate training in my education. For example, in my degree coursework, I had no training in phonetics, phonology, or pronunciation pedagogy. Graduate students enrolled in my TESL/TEFL program could take phonetics and phonology courses in linguistics departments,

[1] The terms understandability, comprehensibility, and intelligibility are used interchangeably. For a discussion of these concepts relevant to perceptions of university faculty see Sheppard, Elliott, and Baese-Berk (2017).

but there were both advantages and disadvantages to doing so. General or theoretical linguistics courses incorporate examples from English but also focus on other languages, as well. Moreover, the focus of these courses is not language pedagogy. The TESL/TEFL student may be better served in applied linguistics classes, which often cover language teaching more generally, though they often have little time for a deep dive into pronunciation pedagogy.

Instructors can get on-the-job training as they work through the curriculum for an assigned course. In my case, the LSG curriculum provided the broad topics that needed to be covered in class, but instructional material that could be used to teach the specifics of pronunciation were not provided. This may be the case in other English language programs. I continued to educate myself by reading books and articles about how to effectively teach pronunciation, but I kept struggling. My question was, "what constitutes the knowledge base that allows NNESTs to implement systematic pronunciation teaching?" Despite the number of NNESTs in the field, and the key role pronunciation plays in oral communication, teaching practices of NNESTs in pronunciation instruction have not been explored much (Couper, 2017).

Due to the unavailability of pronunciation pedagogy courses, I did not learn how to teach pronunciation systematically, which is quite common in many ESL/EFL contexts (Couper, 2017). According to Couper (2017), a major problem in EFL/ESL settings is that teachers often lack sufficient training in pronunciation pedagogy, resulting in a lack of confidence and inadequate skills when it comes to teaching pronunciation effectively. Hence, I propose that we take ownership of our professional development and actively participate in collaborative learning communities to continuously improve our skills and knowledge in the field. All NNESTs can seek other forms of professional development like regularly attending conferences and workshops. Moreover, teachers can learn tips to teach pronunciation from other professionals in the field. While it has been established that teacher training in pedagogical phonology is critical to pronunciation teaching (Murphy, 2014b, Couper 2017), based on my personal experience, I can say that I developed an important part of my knowledge in this area through collaboration with other knowledgeable colleagues and through my own classroom experiences.

Pronunciation Teaching Strategies that Worked Well

Research in teaching pronunciation has demonstrated that explicit instruction can be helpful in becoming a comprehensible speaker despite having a foreign accent. Explicit instruction of phonetic and phonological features of the language can help the learners see differences between languages they speak and the language they are learning (Lee, Jang, and Plonsky, 2015). Levis and Echelberger (2022) suggest integrating pronunciation into language instruction in general. In addition, a study done by Buss (2016) examined the practices of EFL teachers in Brazil and reported that teachers approached pronunciation mainly by focusing on learners' errors through repetition. Much like the grammar structures and charts, I now could see the need to train myself in teaching phonetic and phonological aspects of the language in a structured way. After research, self-observation and reflection, this is how I used some common teaching techniques rooted in best practices in my classes where I taught pronunciation.

Explicit Explanation of Pronunciation Rules & Concepts

Pedagogical research on pronunciation has suggested that explicit pronunciation instruction helps learners achieve intelligible and comprehensible L2 speech (Lee et al., 2015). From what I have observed, students are usually curious about the pronunciation of various words, and this presents itself as a teaching moment where it is easier to draw students' attention to specific rules about pronunciation. I teach these rules explicitly with examples. However, I take an inductive approach where my students first look at specific examples and then construct a rule. For instance, in one of my lower-level classes, the book provides a chart to explain the rules for pronunciation of final *-s* in plurals or third person singular verbs. Before studying the chart and examples, I provide my students with target examples on the board and request information from them to construct the rule. At the end, we go back to the correct pronunciation of the examples and restate the rules.

While explaining how to produce sounds or use pronunciation patterns appropriately can be challenging, directions about what to do with the vocal organs can help some students in some circumstances. I use a vowel chart or a phonemic chart for explicit instruction. The chart is a representation of the space in which the tongue moves to produce vowel and consonant sounds. This approach focuses on listening and imitation to effectively manipulate the vocal tract

to produce sounds in English. I find that understanding where sounds are produced (place of articulation) and how they are produced (manner of articulation) helps students visualize movements which would not normally be visible.

Integration of Pronunciation in Other Language Skills

Levis and Echelberger (2022) noted that pronunciation is connected and is essential to the learning of other language skills like listening, reading, vocabulary, and grammar. Therefore, it can be included where it is relevant to the content or students' needs. For example, in learning new vocabulary, I include an oral component to practice how the words sound, where stressed syllables are, and what unstressed syllables sound like. Other examples include focusing on connecting oral pronunciation and spelling of a word as well as breaking speech into understandable phrases marked by pauses and intonation while reading an article from the textbook.

Corrective Feedback

When addressing specific pronunciation challenges that hinder comprehension in the classroom, I incorporate corrective feedback in pronunciation instruction. Although correcting students' pronunciation errors depends on the context and the activity, it usually helps learners to notice the errors they made and correct them. Before an activity, the teacher must decide whether the lesson's focus is on accuracy or fluency. For example, in a class discussion or debate where I want students to respond quickly and naturally to what other people say, fluency becomes the main focus. However, if I give students time to prepare a dialogue or a presentation, I focus more on accuracy. In accuracy-based lessons, I find more immediate feedback is appropriate. For example, if a student makes a pronunciation error in my class, sometimes I highlight the mistake right away and elicit the correct pronunciation of that word. Other times I repeat the learner's sentence (including the error) and then reformulate the incorrect sentence in a way that demonstrates correct pronunciation. Then I ask the question, "*Is that what you meant to say*?" This allows learners to hear the correct form without explicitly pointing out the error. If it is a whole class discussion or a practice run for the assessment, I make note of the major or repeated errors and share it with the students individually at the end of the lesson. This allows them to complete their thoughts or sentences without any interruptions. My approach is consistent with current pronunciation pedagogy proposed by Saito (2022).

While giving corrective feedback, it is also important to keep in mind that students should not get discouraged or lose the motivation to speak freely. Occasionally, I encourage students to correct each other's mistakes, too. This fosters a collaborative learning environment and reinforces understanding. I elicit feedback by asking questions like "*Did anybody notice a mistake? Can anybody suggest a better way to say that?*" An important point here is to try to balance error correction with positive feedback. Even while pointing out errors on the spot, I try to highlight and praise what students did correctly, as well. For example, I make comments like "*That was a very nice use of the past tense verb, but you made a small pronunciation mistake. Can you tell what that was?*" In my feedback, I include errors related to both the segmental and supra-segmental features of speech because they are both important to clear and intelligible speech.

Conclusion

In conclusion, teachers who identify as nonnative English speakers need to reflect on how they perceive themselves in academia in the United States or any other English-speaking country. In many ways, I have addressed "non-nativeness" by being aware of my own identity. In the field of TESOL, the focus needs to continue to shift away from the native/nonnative speaker dichotomy to the importance of being professional and the professional training of teachers. There is no question that native speakers' natural command of colloquial language and pronunciation can contribute to the perception of effectiveness as teachers. Nevertheless, nonnative teachers have their own skillsets and, despite being nonnative, they can be successful teachers. Moreover, the unique language-learning experiences of NNESTs, which enable them to empathize with their students, should not be underestimated.

As far as teacher training is concerned, more pronunciation pedagogy courses could be added to graduate curricula to help teachers-in-training study best practices to teach pronunciation. These courses should focus on establishing a pedagogical foundation to assist teachers in making informed decisions in pronunciation classes. This foundation should be reinforced with training in essential areas like phonetics, phonology, and theoretical concepts related to second language pronunciation. Additionally, incorporating practical on-the-job training would be valuable, enabling

teachers to apply pronunciation teaching techniques in real-world scenarios. Finally, these training programs need to make NNESTs aware of the advantages they bring to the profession to help them become confident and capable language teachers.

English language teachers need to accept and appreciate the varieties of English that exist today, so that they can set relevant goals for their teaching contexts. They must bear in mind that language learners do not necessarily want to be "native-like." They should be able to assist students in becoming successful speakers in a globalized world with many varieties of English. There is no doubt that we need to focus on phonetic and phonological aspects of English in the classroom. However, the ultimate goal of pronunciation instruction should be to help students to produce intelligible speech that can be easily understood in relevant contexts. Continuing to research pronunciation instruction and its effects on ELLs will help expand our understanding of second language pedagogy and acquisition while broadening our perspectives. As we learn more about how best to address pronunciation in an ESL context, we can hopefully improve how instructors teach and encourage them to recognize pronunciation as a crucial and integral part of second language acquisition.

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