Putting the learner in the spotlight – Future directions for English teachers

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ABSTRACT

This paper asserts that English teachers' understanding of their professionalism enables them to 'put the learner in the spotlight' through their highly-developed awareness of local contexts of English use. Changing attitudes to English language teacher identity include a revaluation of the' native-non-native speaker' dichotomy which is fast becoming irrelevant as teachers assert new identities based on factors such as professional beliefs about their teaching, understanding their students' needs and understanding the role of English in their contexts. In a globalising world, these aspects no longer require 'so-called' native speaker skills, such as pronunciation and knowledge of 'English' culture. In fact, dwelling at length on the issues surrounding native and non-native speaker teacher identity tends to cloud understanding of what qualities English teachers need.

Interviews with multilingual teachers of English, working in a variety of countries, have revealed an understanding of the diminishing importance of the 'native speaker' and the concomitant growth in the confidence of the multilingual teacher. This confidence has been acquired through depth of linguistic knowledge, through observance of other cultures, and through resistance to the encroachment of English by finding a place for the language which satisfies the needs of multilingual users without requiring subservience. In discovering these strengths of multilingual teachers, I show how stepping outside the boundaries of one's own limited environment allows English language teachers, wherever they come from, to develop a truly enlightened international professionalism which puts learners firmly in the spotlight.

Keywords: native speaker; non-native speaker; context; multilingual teacher

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Introduction

This paper is based on my doctoral thesis, entitled 'Learning from multilingual teachers of English'. It embraces the theme of the *International Conference on Current Trends in ELT* (Urmia, Iran, May 2013) 'Putting the learner in the spotlight' because this research shows how the strengths of multilingual teachers in fact help them to achieve this goal, pointing the way for future directions in the field. The research was prompted by my experiences working with multilingual teachers in other countries, particularly Japan and Malaysia.

Based on this experience, the study investigates the beliefs and attitudes about English Language Teaching (ELT) held by teachers who speak more than one language and who have studied and worked in countries where English is not the first language. Attention paid to the role of English in the world has only recently shifted from what is being taught to who is teaching and this important shift allows for an acknowledgement of the diversity of English language teachers, reflected in the knowledge and skills flowing into the profession from a variety of sources. It is timely to investigate the experiences of English language teachers worldwide and, in particular, the experiences of multilingual teachers of English.

For this investigation, I chose to focus on a group of fifteen teachers from seven countries. They were studying in Australia or England, and had been university or college English teachers in their own countries. They had therefore learnt English as a second or third language, used it in their own varying contexts and taught it to students in their countries.

These fifteen 'non-native speakers' fall into a fairly specific category according to three main criteria: profession, definition as 'non-native' speakers of English and current occupation. Professionally, they are all English teachers who worked or have worked in institutions of higher education in their own countries. As 'non-native speakers', they began their lives speaking 'other' languages than English, which they began learning during their schooldays. They could therefore be defined as 'non-native speakers' (Davies, 1991) but given the increasingly dubious reputation of this term, I prefer to call them 'multilingual' and emphasise the value of speaking additional languages. Another shared feature is that they have moved to an English-speaking country where they are continuing their education as English teachers at postgraduate level. At least two individuals are intending to make their futures in an English-speaking country, so for them there may be some different priorities, but the majority are, according to their plans when the interviews were conducted, returning to their countries of birth.

Summary of key terms as described in the literature

'Multilingual'

As stated above, I chose the adjective 'multilingual' to highlight the linguistic skills of the language teachers I interviewed. A broad definition of 'multilingual' is found in Kramsch: "Under 'multilingual' subject, I include people who use more than one language in everyday life ... . They might not know all these languages equally well, nor speak them equally fluently in all circumstances" (Kramsch, 2006, pp. 100-101).

'Multilingual' describes my participants because it brings into focus the important element of linguistic knowledge while, at the same time, diminishing the value of the term 'native speaker'. The word 'multilingual' being inclusive, does not refer exclusively to 'native' or 'non-native' speakers of English but to skills important for the attainment of professional excellence.

'Native/non-native'

The terms 'native/non-native' form a controversial dichotomy whose continuing value will be queried in this paper. A revision of English language teacher identity requires a revision of these terms, which arose in my data only when participants were prompted by my questions about working with 'native speaker' teachers in their contexts and hence do not seem to be a core component of teacher identity. In fact, it is my contention that reducing definitions to dichotomies can be a dangerous way of continuing and promoting prejudice because of the superficial labelling it involves.

The complex nature of English language teacher identity demands an investigation of a variety of concepts and ideologies. Many prominent researchers have exposed the concept of 'native speaker' as a fallacy, citing the inconsistency and illogicality embodied by the term (Phillipson, 1992; Canagarajah, 1999b). Definitions of the native speaker abound in the literature (e.g. Rampton, 1990; Davies, 2003; Cook, 1999; Medgyes, 1992), and they can be reduced to these basic facts:

> The indisputable element in the definition of native speaker is that a person is a native speaker of the language learnt first; the other characteristics are incidental, describing how well an individual uses the language. Someone who did not learn a language in childhood cannot be a native speaker of the language. Later-learnt languages can never be native languages, by definition. (Cook, 1999, p. 187)

The dispute, then, is not with the facts but with the superiority they have been allowed to confer and the prejudice inherent in the resultant dichotomy ('native' vs. 'non-native'). The term 'native speaker fallacy' (Phillipson, 1992) was coined to illustrate the unreliability of the dichotomy. For him, the fallacy lies in the assertion that native speakers of a language are best qualified to teach that language, although any of the 'virtues' listed as belonging to the native speaker can be acquired by non-native speakers. Furthermore, observes Phillipson:

It is … arguable, as a general principle, that non-native teachers may in fact be better qualified than native speakers, if they have gone through the laborious process of acquiring English as a second language and if they have insight into the linguistic and cultural needs of their learners. (1992, pp.194-5)

This is an important observation for the current study, which aims to show how the backgrounds of 'non-native' teachers influence their professionalism by providing evidence from the teachers themselves of the 'laborious process' they have submitted to in order to achieve their goals.

A comprehensive survey of definitions and opinions about the dichotomy was published by Moussu and Llurda (2008). They argue further for the superficiality of the dichotomy with their observation that not all non-native speakers are the same:

> These two categories fail to reflect the real conditions and level of command of a language by a given speaker, and are sometimes misleading in suggesting that one group of speakers has a superior capacity to communicate efficiently and intelligibly than the other. Given the arguments against the existence of such a categorization, as well as the well-attested differences among language users, it would be wise to deal with them with extreme caution (2008, p. 319).

Canagarajah, in another highly relevant article, 'Interrogating the native speaker fallacy' supports this point of view:

> Language teaching is an art, a science and a skill that requires complex pedagogical preparation and practice. Therefore, not all speakers may make good teachers of their first language. On the other hand, it is possible to make a case that speakers with multilingual competence, even in a situation where the language is a foreign or second language, may make successful language teachers. Their proficiency in more than one language system develops a deep metalinguistic knowledge and complex language awareness. (1999a, p. 80)

Another important aspect of the fallacy is clarified here. Granting unconditional superiority to 'native speakers' denies recognition of the knowledge acquired through making the effort to learn another language, surely a key requirement for becoming a successful language teacher. 'Speakers with multilingual competence' may be' native' or 'non- native' speakers but what is more important for their success as language teachers is their knowledge of linguistic processes acquired through learning other languages than their own.

Other researchers have made the point that nativespeakerhood is not the most important factor in English teacher identity. For example, Menard-Warwick opines that "the profession needs to put more value on the pedagogical resources that transnational and intercultural teachers bring to English language teaching" (2008, p. 617).

Menard-Warwick goes on to argue, after analysing the intercultural knowledge and experiences of her two research participants, Paloma and Ruby:

> … these sorts of identity resources have been little addressed in the TESOL literature, which has tended to dichotomize teacher identity as either NEST or NNEST, a dichotomy that doesn't address the kinds of resources that intercultural teachers like Paloma and Ruby bring to their teaching. In sharing their personal histories of understanding and adapting to multiple cultural frameworks and thus modeling intercultural identities, they can open up identity options not previously imagined by their students. (ibid, p. 635)

Menard-Warwick's (2008) study differs from mine because she investigated teachers who had spent time working in other contexts than their own and who could, therefore, be considered 'bi-cultural.' It is, thus, an illustration of the extraordinary diversity of contexts in which teachers of English operate and, in addition, of the growing awareness of the value of intercultural knowledge. The 'personal histories' of Menard-Warwick's teachers contain evidence of 'significant intercultural experiences' which do not constitute a major part of the stories of my participants, who were selected for their expertise in teaching English in their own contexts. Nonetheless, all these stories point to one critical feature, namely that classifying teachers as 'native' or 'non-native' seriously impairs any progress in understanding the value of their skills because it ignores the richness of experience contributing to these skills.

Another feature of teacher identity neglected by too sweeping an application of the dichotomy is the recently observed increased confidence among teachers who were formerly marginalised because of language or location. Holliday reports the views of a number of professionals who express a new level of confidence with the way they teach, and with how they see teachers developing:

> Competent non-native teachers and teacher educators who are also proficient in the language (whatever the variety of English they may be using) are beginning to question the relevance of the ideas imported from the centre. At the same time they are beginning to develop knowledge, skills and experiences to adapt the ideas they have often learnt at universities in the English-speaking West. More importantly, their skills and competence is also gaining recognition. (Holliday, 2005, p. 14)

More details about the 'skills and competence' of multilingual teachers, in fact, emerge in the conversations I report, which have allowed me to explore the various background influences on the evolution of strengths in the various contexts. There is, it seems, a process of blending knowledge from different sources that is integral to teacher cognition. In the case of teachers who have studied abroad and work in diverse contexts, professional knowledge is enriched by the opportunity to stand back and view their own environment from a more distant vantage point. They can then apply this knowledge with the skill and confidence needed.

The role of context

Appreciating the role of context in English language teaching involves understanding the role of the local (cf. Pennycook, below 2010, p. 1)

> It is important to find out how linguistic hegemony is experienced in the day-to-day life of the people and communities in the periphery. How does English compete for dominance with other languages in the streets, markets, homes, schools and villages of periphery communities? How does English infiltrate the hearts and minds of the people there? What is missing, then, is a micro-social perspective - the lived culture and everyday experience of periphery communities. (Canagarajah, 1999b, pp. 41-42)

These words of Canagarajah (1999b) prompted my investigation of the lived experiences of English teachers around the world in an effort to include local knowledge as an important aspect of English language teacher identity. Elsewhere, Canagarajah has alluded to the power of the local, especially in his own experience:

> ... people have been teaching languages quite successfully even in pre-modern communities from pre-scientific times. These are the teachers still working in the remote corners of the world in small village classrooms often meeting under trees in farms and fields away from the eyes of the professional pundits of the centre. The 'English teachers' are village elders, parents and priests who may often possess only a smattering of English. Some of them don't have any advanced professional training (other than a post-high school training). I am not ashamed to say that it is such a charismatic rural teacher in Sri Lanka who initiated my own learning of the language which has sustained me to this point of earning a doctorate in English linguistics and serving in the faculty of an English department. (2004, 140-141)

These aspects of local learning and teaching are seldom valued, yet they often provide a solid foundation for the acquisition of knowledge. Early learning experiences, moreover, are acknowledged to be important for the development of teacher cognition (Borg, 2003).

A clear instance of the importance of context in language teaching was provided by Bax, in his argument against the dominance of CLT (Communicative Language Teaching). His anecdote illustrates how an over-zealous adherence to method can blind inexperienced teachers:

> In the manner of HG Wells' time traveller, I stumbled on a school that had remained oblivious to developments in language teaching, where teachers looked at me strangely when I questioned their obsession with Grammar-Translation and suggested that speaking was the most important skill in learning a language (Diploma essay).
>
> In my view, this displays an unfortunate attitude: a young and relatively inexperienced teacher comes to a new country of which he has almost no knowledge. Without any reference to the culture, the learning context, student needs and wishes and other contextual factors, he immediately judges far more experienced teachers as failing. And what gives him the licence to do so, as he sees it, is that he is a native speaker and that he is armed with CLT. (Bax, 2003, p. 279)

Bax goes on to build up a case for replacing CLT with a 'context approach' by which he means taking into account the environment in which learning is taking place. His argument, therefore, supports the case for multilingual teachers being recognised as experts in terms of judging how their particular context influences approaches to teaching English.

There is an implied lack of knowledge in this area which my research is seeking to redress by involving local rather than 'centre' voices of authority.

> The notion of the local has become an increasingly significant focus across the social sciences, to a large extent as a reaction to what has been seen as broad, ungrounded theorizing throughout much of the 20th century. Rather than talk about human nature, universal cognition, or language structure, the focus has shifted towards the local, the grounded, the particular. (Pennycook, 2010, p. 1)

To this general justification for considering the local may be added a range of reasons to support the relevance of local contexts for English Language teaching. Canagarajah (2005) provides an overview of local /global issues which informs the approach developed in the current study, observing, "… the context from which we speak shapes the knowledge we produce" (2005, p. 14).

This concludes the necessarily brief survey of key terms as discussed in the literature. It has shown continuing efforts to grapple with native–speakerist ideologies by looking closely at how, where and by whom English is taught.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study, relying on data gathered in interviews with English Language Teaching professionals. In order to locate possible participants, I approached the coordinators, both known to me, of TESOL programs at two of Adelaide's universities and was invited to address the overseas students at one institution while at the other, I was invited to become a member of the newly established 'TESOL researchers group'. The latter arrangement proved the more successful, and not only did I re-establish contact with a former MA student, now taking time off from her home university to complete her PhD in Australia, but I developed a rapport with a number of other PhD candidates, who became willing participants to my research. From this group, over a period of about two years, I obtained more than half my data, through interviews and notes in my research diary.

The interviews, or conversations, were recorded in fairly relaxed circumstances in coffee shops or other congenial places on university campuses where the participants were studying, or nearby, so as to minimize disruption to busy schedules and foster a friendly, informal ambience. This qualitative approach to data gathering is supported by researchers such as Kvale, who observes:

> There is a move away from obtaining knowledge primarily through external observation and experimental manipulation of human subjects, toward an understanding by means of conversations with the human beings to be understood. The subjects not only answer questions prepared by an expert, but themselves formulate in a dialogue their own conceptions of the lived world. The sensitivity of the interview and its closeness to the subjects' lived world can lead to knowledge that can be used to enhance the human condition. (1996, p.11)

The data analysis section will illustrate how this interaction succeeds in highlighting the issues being explored concerning the confidence and skills of multilingual teachers.

The conversations, lasting between forty-five and ninety minutes, were transcribed and then qualitatively analysed to isolate the key themes. Although time and space do not allow a detailed discussion of the methodology here, it is explained in detail in my thesis (Swan, 2012). The following data analysis section shows how the themes constituting the findings described in this paper emerged from interaction with the participants.

Data analysis

Evidence from the research participants illustrates the value of a highly developed awareness of local context for English teaching. Firstly, the background of a comfortable learning environment is established by participant anecdotes exhibiting flashes of humour:

> Chin1f. Well actually I joked with them [my students].... I said the worst thing that can happen is you become us!
>
> Chin2f: You know the … group is composed of teachers and postgraduates. The other day we had a talk with one of the postgraduates and she told us 'I want to be one of you, I want to be a colleague of you'
>
> Chin1f: so I said that is the worst thing that can happen - you become us! Which is not so bad! (Chin1f & Chin2f)

Enthusiasm, expressed with humour in this bantering exchange, continues to be a motivating force in participants' career trajectories; in fact, the teachers, Chin1f and Chin2f, appear to be role models for the postgraduates, ensuring continuing interest in the profession, while showing the degree to which they have bonded with their students.

Dealing with lack of confidence and self-marginalization

Lack of belief in their own capabilities, or what has been termed 'self-marginalization' (Kumaravadivelu, 2006) is also seen by Viet1m in influencing teachers' attitudes:

> … many of - all the language teaching methods or approaches – we borrowed, or we imported from the outside, but they do not see the important points that all these methods have been adopted and adapted into the context that they work in and they do not see what they have done, the effort they have put in, to make these approaches and the methods work in their context. They still think 'OK, these are the things we borrow

from the others and what they say is always correct' so they do not see their strengths. (Viet1m)

From these observations, it appears that Viet1m sees Vietnamese teachers to be lacking in confidence because they do not value their own efforts in adapting and applying new methods. His aim is to encourage the teachers in his classes to recognise how their professional skills have grown not only by borrowing new methods, but also by taking particular steps to adapt the methods to their own classrooms.

Viet1m has, thus, made considerable efforts to encourage trainee teachers in Vietnam to understand their local expertise and use it, rather than rely on what they have learnt from foreign sources:

> In fact … the only thing I have done when I carried out the PD professional development for secondary school teachers – I encouraged them to go from *their* context, *their* students, *their* environment, the facilities, the equipment that they have and they can see what is the best way the students can learn or they can develop their language ability. (Viet1m)

Encouragement of this kind will, it is contended, enhance the respect deserved for local knowledge by enabling teachers to see that the best influence on successful teaching derives from what they can see in their immediate environment.

Local knowledge – content and method

With a similar regard for matching content to local issues, Viet1m described an example of adapting both topic and method. In this anecdote, he describes how he made use of both content and method in a particular teaching situation:

> … sometimes I help the students to translate but I always make it clear to the students- both kinds of students who learn English as compulsory course and English as a specialization, that translation, when you learn reading for example, so we have to develop certain skills to do reading – so when you are doing the reading at that time, so translation is forbidden, never translate because (Yes in those cases you wouldn't) yes but in other cases OK, I remember one case – we talked about development project in a third world country and we talk about the sound of the frogs - development, yeah when they bring the logging and they take the land from the people in development projects and then they clear out all the crops so people do not hear the croaking any more, or their music, something like that OK really similar to the situation in Vietnam …and we ask the students to translate so the translation at that time we focus on how to use – discussion – the knowledge of grammar of English, vocabulary to understand the meaning and when we have done it they meet to apply the information they have got to Vietnamese, in the way that Vietnamese people have – it cannot be like word for word translation – it becomes, it's not Vietnamese any more – OK in this way we use translation, the translation is a whole, I would say science – but you should not always apply translation into, I would say reading, or doing the listening or something (no) It means that I still use translation in my class for a very clear purpose (Viet1m).

The two important points arising from this example concern firstly, the choice of content and secondly, the use of translation as part of the method. The content – an article on an environmental issue – illustrates a strong local connection with the disappearance of frogs croaking as their habitat is destroyed and takes the language learning activity into students' lives more profoundly than a

commercially produced textbook. The translation activity derived from the text is developed in such a way that the students are able to think about how the language works: He has used 'translation' not as an end in itself but as a tool to show the differences in the structures of English and Vietnamese – a relevant activity when teacher and student share a first language. This is one example of what he was trying to encourage his own students to do as teachers – to use and adapt methods to achieve an outcome. The use of the first language enables him to point out how English translated into Vietnamese word for word is 'not Vietnamese any more' and from there it is a straightforward step to infer the reverse process for English. Learning how languages are structured is in this way made comprehensible through contrast with a known linguistic system.

Participants were often able to refer to the value of knowing other languages when teaching English. Chin1f perceived a definite advantage in being bilingual:

> But for us I like to think that we find many interesting and funny sentences that are totally not English in the students' writing, but we understand! Because we come from the same first language and so it is easy to read it (and that is the advantage) if I translate `word for word in Chinese. (Chin1f)

Consequently, it becomes easier to pinpoint the linguistic differences more effectively:

> I guess the first lesson that I learned about students errors especially about the Chinese students' errors in English is that you learn to appreciate it [having a common first language]. … I understand why they make these mistakes because I know in Chinese language we don't have a very strict tense system, we don't have a very comprehensive attributive clause system, quite a lot is missing in Chinese so I understand why they make these mistakes. (Chin1f)

Appreciating the value of this level of linguistic awareness gave these participants a measure of confidence that allowed them to define their professionalism in a specific and relevant way.

The operation of contextual factors: Teachers and CLT

Teachers' appropriation of aspects of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) provides an example of how they are influenced by their own contexts. In the Philippines, teachers expressed a degree of discomfort with CLT, which Phil1f attributed to the following reasons:

> Yes, but when, when the class was changed a bit – when they started introducing communicative language teaching for example, you know, and we've had meetings on this several times and we've talked about communicative language teaching and how in these courses the students should be given more opportunities to communicate- more speaking, you know with each other – more speaking with peers, more writing activities, etc. But not all the teachers are really into communicative language teaching mainly because they feel the students are not ready for it. Mainly because they feel they need to learn more about grammar before they can start communicating so there's a whole debate around that. (Phil1f)

Reactions recorded here recall what may be expected from any traditionalist core being faced with a 'new' approach: the feeling that more 'grammar' is needed smacks strongly of a traditional bias. However, the Filipino teachers are not operating in a western context and they may, therefore, feel

that, in addition to being asked to embrace a new teaching approach, they are being asked to, possibly, abandon practices that are part of their own educational culture, which is bound to be different to the Western cultural setting of CLT. Consequently, these teachers' judgments of what students may be 'ready for' cannot easily be interpreted by someone from outside their context, i.e. from a 'Western' setting.

Participants' understanding of their students' needs was related to a large extent to their use of CLT methodology. Hence, some of the criticism of CLT was a result of lack of appropriate contexts for students to develop their communication skills. Considering the Chinese context, Chin4m was doubtful of how far CLT should be prioritized.

> I think English in China has to be practical how to accept- or we have to face the fact that it is hard for learners to have access to English language environment and we have to accept the fact that in comparison with learners' reading and writing ability maybe listening and speaking are relatively weak. I think it's natural. I think in the situation where English is a foreign language I think it's practical. It is realistic to pay attention to reading because this is the major channel for learners to have access to English. While we focus – we emphasise the improvement of learners' speaking and listening abilities we have to consider this issue on the basis of reading. If we accept that reading is still the major channel for learners to access English we have to base the training of listening and speaking on the basis of reading because reading is to some extent the focus of language input...with this input we could consider how to improve listening and speaking abilities. (Chin4m)

Here, there is reference to the difficulty of accessing an 'English language environment' and a way of dealing with this issue is proposed, namely to use reading as the basis for developing listening and speaking skills. Viewing a wholly 'communicative' approach as not matching the needs of Chinese students, Chin4m wishes to provide them with a strong basis in reading before exposing them to what he considers to be limited listening and speaking opportunities. Again, as with Phil1f, it is difficult for outsiders to assess his view without an adequate knowledge of the context he is describing.

Managing the native/non-native speaker teacher relationship

For present purposes 'foreign' indicates teachers who, for the most part are (though not necessarily) 'native speakers' of English, but who are always foreign nationals in the countries discussed below. Participants, particularly from Thailand and China, have described in some detail their experiences working with teachers from other countries, thus adding a dimension to perceptions of professional identity. Memories of working with foreign teachers included a range of advantages and disadvantages, dependent not only on local policies and conditions but also on interpersonal and cultural factors. They illustrate how being a 'native speaker' is not an essential part of a teacher's professional identity, which includes a number of variable factors. Native-speakerhood is an important attribute but is not always seen as a sufficient qualification in the absence of other major skills, such as cultural sensitivity or grammatical and linguistic knowledge.

The picture emerging of foreign teaching staff attributes less merit to their teaching skills than to their value as native speakers of English able to provide models of the target language. Thus, their popularity seems to result from their usefulness in teaching oral skills and their knowledge of cultural aspects of English. Chin3f claims this advantage for foreign teachers: 'They like to talk. This is the first priority!' (Chin3f) Overwhelmingly, foreign teachers are recognised not so much for teaching ability as for providing important practice for developing speaking skills, especially in

contexts like those already discussed, where there is limited access to spoken English. All the Chinese participants gave this as the first reason for employing foreigners: '… they are usually arranged to teach oral English ...' (Chin4m) and it is also the main reason in Thailand and Indonesia.

As a result of this fondness for 'talk', Chin3f goes on to claim that her students in fact make enormous progress through interaction with foreign teachers and become more enthusiastic about seeking her help to develop their oral skills:

> They have improved a lot. Improved a lot from talking to international teachers, international students and through their preparation work they like to do so. Some students often ask me to give them assignments like the oral test, the oral English or role play or anything else. (Chin3f)

Making use of this advantage, Thai1f organised successful team-teaching arrangements in her department:

> I have more than 10 native speakers – most of them are responsible and usually we set up the conversation class for them ... team teaching and one Thai teacher with a native speaker because we have about 50 students in one class and I know it is hard for them so I take, I set up one Thai teacher with the native speaker and let them work together. (Thai1f)

In fact, according to evaluations, student impressions of foreign teachers were generally positive. Continuing employment of teachers depended on confidential student evaluations, which were quantitatively evaluated. Foreign teachers were seen as useful repositories of cultural knowledge but this, again, had no particular reference to teaching skills. Thai3f and Thai4f, for example, found foreigners a useful resource when faced with unexpected idioms and concepts, especially when they were using foreign materials:

> Yes, we use British or American textbooks and I feel that it is not right but they [education authority] will come and there will be a lot of questions about credit if we produce our own textbook so we … we're not there yet but we'd like to try. (Thai4f)

In this way, foreign teachers were able to supplement the textbooks. Thai3f and Thai4f felt that imported textbooks were not appropriate but before producing their own, they had to find a way of dealing with the requirements of their education authority.

From these reminiscences, it can be inferred that there are particular roles assigned to foreign employees, according to local perceptions of their value. Generally students enjoyed interaction with foreign staff and, on the whole, the advantages of foreign staff outweighed the disadvantages in participants' testimonies but some concerns were voiced.

The following observation refers to oft-repeated comments about grammatical knowledge. Thai3f preferred to ask her local colleagues to answer her questions, but was happy to rely on 'native speakers' to explain cultural factors: 'Very helpful to explain about culture – I don't ask them about grammar – they just say "it's like that" ' … . (Thai3f)

This is in contrast to the knowledge of local teachers. '... some Thai teachers are very good and I ask them every time.' This comment echoes suggestions elsewhere in the data that foreign or 'native speaker' teachers were recognized as not being knowledgeable about grammar (cf. Chin1f, Indi1f). It indicates a division in beliefs about language teaching between 'native' and 'non-native'

teachers which could reward further exploration. The stereotypical perception is that 'native speakers' do not consider grammar important, whereas 'non-native speakers' value it highly.

The most unexpected revelation about the 'native speaker' is that they do not seem to be seen as a threat. When foreign teachers became colleagues, they were the ones in need of support from local staff, and Thai1f had a story of taking a distressed foreigner to hospital at 2am, to quote one example. In these circumstances, native speakers were not perceived as threatening. The world of the multilingual teacher, then, is well populated with 'native speakers' but they are not necessarily seen as the dominant side of a dichotomy. Rather, they are welcomed into local environments to fulfil a specific purpose and local teachers are very capable of judging how well they do so, as when Thai3f, above, claimed that they do not teach grammar well.

Native speakers are included among participants' early teachers, they are sought in cities for oral skills practice, and they are employed to satisfy local regulations (e.g. China, Thailand). Their teaching roles seem to be clearly delineated, so that they provide support in ways that local institutions deem appropriate. Occasionally, there is a sense of inequity, such as when they are seen to have better conditions than local staff, but these issues depend on local policies and cannot be easily judged outside the employing institution. Of greater interest is the sense that there is not the same division into inferior and superior members of the profession based on speakerhood that was found to exist by Aboshiha (2008), in her study of 'native speaker' teachers. Her participants claimed that there was 'respect' for 'native speakers' in many locations. However, my multilingual participants have expressed reservations about the 'native speakers' working in their institutions. The contrast in views is possibly due to the self-confidence of the native speakers, who appear to believe they represent British educational and teacher training systems which are superior to 'other' educational systems and training. They believe that both the 'other' systems and 'other' learners are in need of adopting a more British understanding of education (Aboshiha, 2008)

It is possible that 'native speakers' who hold these beliefs have not really considered any alternatives. They may have been seduced by the unfailing politeness and hospitality of the host country, which some of my Thai participants exemplified, to believe even more strongly in their own superiority. The evidence of Chinese, Thai and Indian participants accords with Aboshiha's 'native speaker' participant who asserts his superiority for teaching pronunciation but not with respect to grammar, which they claim is better done by 'non-native speakers'. Furthermore, the local staff express an alternate view of the belief expressed by Aboshiha's 'native speakers' that they are preferred for employment:

> When talking of 'non-native speaker' English language teachers in his institution in Saudi Arabia, Rob said 'there are not supposed to be any' (59-60). Rob reinforced this comment with these remarks: 'I think, world-wide, there is a respect for native speakers' (131-133). He also added: 'There is a respect for 'native speakers' on the part of this institution. Alex added '[My institution] wanted only 'native speakers' (135). Vera, too, said: 'In Japan, [in my institution] 'native speakers' are seen as people who can come and improve the level of teaching and learning' (57-58). (Aboshiha, 2008, p. 139)

According to Chin1f, Chin4m and Thai1f, there are government regulations requiring the employment of a certain number of 'native speakers', regardless of their quality – or qualifications, and thus there are different perceptions of the value of 'native speakers' which seem to depend on individual backgrounds. Perhaps the 'native speakers' are secure in their own sense of superiority and cannot imagine that they might be seen as lacking in any way. On the other hand, the multilingual, or 'non-native' speakers are secure in their own environments and, having attained senior positions in their institutions, are able to make judgements of the foreigners they employ, who, while helpful, may not always be able to live up to local expectations. A perceived lack of

knowledge of teaching content, especially grammar, emerged as one major criticism in participant testimonies.

Conclusion

What, then, are the strengths of multilingual teachers which can be incorporated into future directions for English teachers?

Throughout this paper, I have emphasised the relevance of contextual knowledge in enabling teachers to assess their learners' needs. Evidence from participants has revealed that teaching is enriched by local knowledge, both linguistic and environmental.

Participants have shown an understanding of the 'native-speaker' role in non-English background countries, which they have seen not as an absolute position of superiority but a more nuanced role where the skills of both sides of the dichotomy are acknowledged. A further step might be to encourage a view of multilingual teachers as individuals with a range of cultural and linguistic experiences which could contribute to a given context. Such a view would be more helpful to the image of the profession than one which allows any 'native speaker' to be employed as an English teacher in countries where English is not widely spoken. These countries could define the skills and qualifications they expect from 'native speaker' teachers and in so doing allow for a realistic appraisal of strengths.

From teachers' comments, we have seen that the native speaker/non-native speaker dichotomy really only occupies a minimal part of teachers' lives. Their concerns are with the management of their professional lives and how to ensure the best learning and teaching environments for their students. Thus, they make use of the confidence acquired from their multilingual skills, together with their experience in English-speaking countries, their understanding of local contexts, compared with those they have observed or learnt about, involving , for example, CLT, and an appreciation of the range of skills that teachers, whatever their backgrounds, may bring to the classroom.

Finally, then, it is local knowledge, combined with linguistic knowledge, that leads to professional confidence, enabling English teachers to constantly adjust materials and methodology, as they put their learners in the spotlight as the primary focus for their professional strengths.

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Appendix

Coding of participants

To preserve anonymity, participants are identified according to nationality, number of participants of that nationality, and gender. Hence 'Thaif1' refers to a female participant from Thailand, who is distinguished from other Thai females by adding a number to her nationality and gender. The participants comprise three males and eleven females, reflecting the gender balance among postgraduate students in TESOL. The list of 15 participants is identified as follows:

Country	Code
China	Chin1f
	Chin2f
	Chin3f
	Chin4m
Singapore	Sing1f
	Sing2m
Indonesia	Indo1f
India	Indi1f
Philippines	Phil1f
Vietnam	Viet1m
Thailand	Thai1f
	Thai2f
	Thai3f
	Thai4f
	Thai5f