

TESOL Graduate Students' Self-Perceptions as Nonnative English Speaking Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the way TESOL graduate students perceive themselves as nonnative English speaking teachers (NNESTs), employing a mixed method research design. Quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire administered to 45 TESOL graduate students in a Korean TESOL program, while qualitative data were collected from intensive interviews with 10 focal participants. A high percentage of the participants believed that their English proficiency is high. However, in a comparison with native English speaking teachers (NESTs), they considered NESTs superior to NNESTs in all areas of English skills. For teaching methods, communicative language teaching (CLT) was regarded as the best method although most of the participants did not use CLT in their actual classrooms. The reasons for the discrepancy are: (1) lack of English speaking proficiency, (2) lack of knowledge about the target culture, (3) students' expectations on NNESTs, (4) parents' expectations on NNESTs, and (5) reading-focused Korean SAT.

Key words: TESOL graduate students, nonnative English speaking teachers (NNESTs), teacher self-perceptions, communicative language teaching (CLT)

I. Introduction

It is reported that nonnative-English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) have outnumbered native-English-speaking teachers (NESTs). Graddol (2006) states that nonnative speakers constitute 80% of the total English language teacher population in the world. An increasing number of nonnative speakers in TESOL programs in the Inner Circle adds to this evidence. Liu (1999) says that nonnative speakers occupy about 40% of the total TESOL graduate student population in the Inner Circle. Kamhi-Stein (1999) reports that 70% of the students in a TESOL program, in which her research was conducted, are nonnative speakers. Despite a significant increase of NNESTs in the TESOL profession, NNESTs are struggling to position themselves because of their nonnativeness: NNESTs have been considered as second-rate teachers compared to their counterpart, NESTs.

Recent research on the issues of NNESTs has demonstrated that they have advantages that NESTs cannot bring to students (Braine, 1999; Kamhi-Stein, 2004; Llurda, 2005). Phillipson (1996) argues that "non-native teachers may be better qualified than native speakers, if they have gone through the complex process of acquiring English as a second or foreign language" (p. 27). Medgyes (1992, 1994) believes that NNESTs can be good role models to their students because they have already experienced what learning English as a second or foreign language was like.

The issues of NNESTs have been actively investigated in the Inner and Outer Circle while they have not been widely explored in the Expanding Circle. Korea is no exception: Only a

few studies have dealt with the issues of Korean NNESTs. Therefore, this study will touch on the previously ignored dimension of Korean NNESTs who are currently studying in a Korean TESOL program.

II. Methodology

1. Research Questions

This study examines the way Korean TESOL graduate students perceive themselves as nonnative English speaking teachers (NNESTs), employing a mixed method research design. Three research questions guide this study:

- (1) How do Korean TESOL graduate students perceive themselves as NNESTs?
- (2) What do they think are the differences between NESTs and NNESTs in terms of teaching behavior?
- (3) What do they think is the most desirable teaching method? If there is a discrepancy between their most desirable teaching method and most widely employed teaching method, what are the reasons?

2. Data Collection

This study was conducted in a TESOL graduate program in Korea, which had a total enrollment of 130 at the time of data collection. For research question (1) and (2) quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire administered to 45 students in the program, while qualitative data were collected from intensive interviews with 10 focal participants for research question (3).

III. Findings

Q1: How do Korean TESOL graduate students perceive themselves as NNESTs?

[Table 1] Participants' Self-Perceptions of English Proficiency

Self-perception of English Proficiency	Number	Percentage
Low	2	4.4
Medium	14	31.1
High	27	60.0
Near Native	2	4.4
Total	45	100.0

[Table 2] Who Is More Successful?

Who is more successful?	Number	Percentage
NESTs	6	13.3
NNESTs	8	17.8
No difference	31	68.9
Total	45	100.0

Q2: What do they think are the differences between NESTs and NNESTs in terms of teaching

behavior?

<Table 3> Participants' Perceptions of the Proficiency of NESTs and NNESTs

Language skill	NESTs are better	NNESTs are better
Speaking	44 (97.8%)	1 (2.2%)
Pronunciation	44 (97.8%)	1 (2.2%)
Listening	40 (88.9%)	5 (11.1%)
Writing	38 (84.4%)	7 (15.6%)
Vocabulary	33 (73.3%)	12 (26.7%)
Reading	31 (68.9%)	14 (31.1%)

<Table 4> Participants' Perceptions of the Most Difficult Skill to Teach

Language skill	Number	Percentage
Speaking	20	44.4
Writing	16	35.6
Listening	5	11.1
Reading	2	4.4
Grammar	2	4.4
Total	45	100.0

<Table 5> Participants' Perceptions of the Most Desirable Teaching Method

What is the most desirable teaching method?	Number	Percentage
CLT	42	93.3
ALM	2	4.4
Natural Approach	1	2.2
Total	45	100.0

Q3: What do they think is the most desirable teaching method? If there is a discrepancy between their most desirable teaching method and most widely employed teaching method, what are the reasons?

<Table 6> Reasons for the Discrepancy

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of English speaking proficiency 2. Lack of knowledge about the target culture 3. Students' expectations on NNESTs 4. Parents' expectations on NNESTs 5. Reading-focused Korean SAT
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(1) Lack of English speaking proficiency

I think that TETE (Teaching English through English) is the most desirable way to teach English. TETE will be very helpful for students, I believe. However, my English [speaking ability] prevents me from doing that. I feel sorry for my students. My class is reading-centered...

영어를 영어로 가르치는 수업이 가장 바람직하다고 생각하고 있어요. 또 그렇게 하는 것이 학생들에게 가장 큰 도움이 될 거라고 믿어요. 그런데 그렇게 못하는 것이 제 영어 때문이에요. 학생들에게 미안하죠. 자꾸 해석 위주로 가게 되고...

(2) Lack of knowledge about the target culture

Since I don't have much knowledge about the target culture, I don't deal with the target culture as content. I tend not to talk about the target culture introduced in the textbook.

제가 영미 문화에 대한 지식이나 경험이 많이 없으니까 영미 문화를 수업 시간에 잘 다루지 않아요. 그런 내용이 나오면 그냥 넘어가기도 하고 그런 내용을 피하게 돼요.

(3) Students' expectations on NNESTs

Based on my experience as a NNEST, students don't want NNESTs to teach in English. Their expectations on NNESTs are different from those on NESTs. When I taught in English, my students asked me to teach in Korean. Some students even asked me to explain what they learned from NESTs in Korean.

경험에 비추어 보면 제 생각에 학생들은 한국인 교사가 영어로 수업하는 걸 원하지 않아요. 원어민 교사와 우리에게 대한 기대치가 달라요. 제가 한 번은 영어로 수업을 했는데, 학생들이 한국어로 수업을 해 달라는 거예요. 심지어 어떤 학생은 원어민 시간에 배운 걸 한국어로 쉽게 설명해 달라고 하는 거예요.

(4) Parents' expectations on NNESTs

I taught with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), but parents didn't want me to teach with CLT. They didn't believe that I could improve their children's English proficiency. They just expected me to help their children make good marks at school; they said it directly. It seemed that they didn't believe in my English proficiency.

제가 의사소통 중심으로 수업을 영어로 진행한 적이 있었어요. 그런데 학부모들은 저 같은 내국인이 그렇게 수업하는 걸 원하지 않았어요. 저에게 기대하는 것은 자녀의 영어 실력 향상이 아니라 빠른 시간 내에 학교 성적을 향상시켜 달라는 거였어요. 그걸 직접 와서 얘기하더라구요. 제 영어 실력을 못 믿는 것 같기도 하고... 그랬어요.

(5) Reading-focused Korean SAT

Students regard reading as the most important skill. Vocabulary follows reading, and listening comes next. They are not interested in speaking and writing except those who want to get admissions from US universities. Speaking and writing are left out in Korean SAT. Teachers tend to marginalize speaking and writing. There is no reason to use English in class.

학생들은 읽기를 가장 중요시해요. 그리고 단어 실력이죠. 그 다음은 듣기예요. 말하기와 쓰기는 미국 대학으로 진학하는 애들이면 모를까 일반 학생들은 거의 관심 없어요. 수능에 안 나오니까요. 교사들도 말하기와 쓰기는 안 하게 돼요. 그러다 보니 영어로 수업을 진행할 이유가 없는 거예요.

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About the Presenter

Hohsung Choe received his Ph.D. in Foreign and Second Language Education from Indiana University, Bloomington. He is currently teaching at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. His research interests include second language acquisition, L1/L2 loss and maintenance, second language writing, world Englishes, and issues of nonnative-English-speaking teachers.