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Introduction



In the mid-1990s, I wrote an introductory book on English teaching entitled *More Than a Native Speaker: An Introduction to Teaching English Abroad* (TESOL 1996; revised 2006) for native speakers of English who were learning to teach English in nations such as China, Japan, Romania, and Saudi Arabia where English is mainly used and taught as a foreign language. To some degree, the issues addressed by the book were similar to those in any introduction to English teaching, but in other ways the content was somewhat distinctive because it specifically addressed the special challenges of teaching English in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings.

Over the past few years, I have continued to do training for English teachers working in EFL settings; however, I have spent more time training English teachers for whom English is a second (or even third or fourth) language rather than their native language. To some extent, the challenges faced by these teachers are similar to those faced by native English speakers who teach in EFL contexts. However, English teachers for whom English is a second language are in some ways a special group in that the challenges they face are somewhat different from those faced by native English teachers, and the strengths they bring to their teaching are also somewhat different.

This book is essentially a revision of *More Than a Native Speaker* that better addresses the needs and concerns of a special category of future English teachers, those who have learned English as a second language and who live and work in countries where English is generally not spoken as the first language. To be more specific, I make three assumptions:

1. I assume you learned English as a second language (or perhaps your third, fourth, or even fifth language) rather than your first. You probably learned English in school instead of at home and probably would not consider yourself a native speaker of English. This means that, while you may have an impressive command of English, your English may still not be as strong as you would like it to be, and you may be continuing to improve your English at the same time as you are preparing to teach it. However, this also means that you have extensive experience in language learning. You have certainly spent

much time studying English, and you may well have also studied other foreign languages, or languages and dialects in your own country that are different from your first language.

2. I assume that you live and teach in an EFL context, in other words, a setting where English is learned and spoken as a foreign language. This is quite different from teaching in English as a second language (ESL) contexts, where students are surrounded by English and often have a strong desire to learn it as quickly as possible in order to study, find a job, or simply interact with more of the people around them. In contrast, students in EFL settings have much less natural exposure to English and fewer opportunities to practice. This means that they often study English more to pass tests than to build communicative proficiency and that motivating students tends to be more of a challenge.¹
3. I assume that you are a native of the culture in which you teach. This means that you have a native understanding of the students' cultural background and of the educational culture that surrounds you and the students. You also have the ability to speak to students in their first language, so you face fewer obstacles in communicating your ideas than a foreign teacher in your country would.

Here I note that English teachers like you are not a minor subcategory of the world's English teachers. As Braine (1999, xvii) points out, there are probably about four nonnative-speaking English teachers for every teacher who is a native speaker. Also, there are more English teachers in EFL settings (e.g., China, Japan, Pakistan, Russia) than in ESL settings like the United States and Britain. Finally, most of the world's English teachers are natives of the country where they teach rather than foreigners. So, in many ways, if you have the characteristics listed above, you represent the largest and most typical category of English teachers in the world.

The aim of this book is to provide new English teachers with an introduction to the concepts and methods of English language teaching. While the book provides an overall introduction to English teaching, four themes receive special emphasis: communicative language teaching (CLT), proficiency, language learning, and practicality.

Communicative Language Teaching

By and large, the theoretical perspective from which I write is that of CLT, an approach that assumes that the main goal of language learning is to improve the ability to use the language for

¹ Many scholars in recent years divide English teaching contexts into one of three categories: (1) Inner Circle nations, in which English is spoken as the first—and often only—language by the majority of the population (e.g., the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia); (2) Outer Circle nations, in which English is not the first language of most of the population but has some official role (e.g., in education) and is sometimes used for internal communication (e.g., India, Singapore; most of these are ex-colonies of the British Empire); and (3) Expanding Circle nations, where English is only taught and used as a foreign language and is generally only used for interaction with people from other countries (e.g., China, Japan). (See Kachru 1992 for further discussion.) My use of the term *EFL contexts* corresponds with the Expanding Circle category, and it is readers in this context that I have primarily in mind as I write this book.

I use the EFL/ESL categories in this book partly because these terms are familiar to many people; more importantly, I feel the phrase *English as a foreign language* better captures how teachers and students in Expanding Circle nations view English. For example, the concept of English as a foreign language translates directly and easily into many languages; the Chinese term *waiyu* and the Japanese term *gaigokugo* both literally mean *outsider* (i.e., foreign) language. I also wish to avoid any suggestion that English necessarily spreads like expanding circles on a pond, with Expanding Circle countries inevitably on the road to becoming Outer Circle countries. As noted, virtually all Outer Circle countries were once part of the British Empire, and, in that sense, their history is distinctly different from that of many Expanding Circle countries.

communication and that many or most activities in language classes will be genuinely communicative in nature. (Other basic assumptions of CLT are introduced in chapter 2.) I do not assume that CLT is the only “right” approach to language teaching or that its assumptions are always relevant or realistic in all settings. But I have chosen to draw heavily on CLT for several reasons.

First, as a Westerner who was trained in the CLT tradition, this is the one with which I am most familiar and can most effectively introduce. Second, I presume that teacher trainees who are willing to read a book on language teaching written in English by a Westerner are interested in views on language teaching that are currently popular in the West. Finally, I believe that even if a pure CLT approach to English teaching is not necessarily the best approach for English teachers in EFL settings to adopt, an understanding of its assumptions and methods is still valuable to you as a source of ideas, and introducing CLT ideas to you will help stimulate your own thinking about English teaching. Often the best way to see one’s own ideas most clearly is to compare and contrast them with a different set of ideas, so even if the assumptions of CLT are not entirely appropriate to your context or teaching, looking at teaching issues from a CLT perspective may still help you sharpen your thinking.

Proficiency

If the goal of language learning is the ability to communicate, then it is very important to build students’ proficiency—that is, their skills in using the language to express their own ideas, interact with others, and understand the ideas of others. As noted above, in many EFL settings, English study is focused to a large extent on passing examinations, and the assumption is that there is some correlation between good examination results and actual proficiency. To some extent this is true; students who do well on English language examinations often have a better functional command of English than those who do poorly. However, heavy focus on examination scores can also distort the goals of language learners, causing them to focus more on getting good test scores than on building actual English proficiency. Unfortunately, preparing for examinations is not always the same thing as building proficiency, and too often students invest a great deal of time in study efforts that do not help build proficiency. Therefore, as I consider the issue of language teaching, I give special attention to the question of how to teach students in ways that will both prepare them for examinations and help them build actual English skills.

Language Learning

An important goal of this book is to help teachers gain a better understanding of language learning, and to encourage and equip them for their own continued language learning. As I argue in chapter 1, it is of great benefit for English teachers—and, in fact, all foreign language teachers—to have as much as experience as possible as foreign language learners. As this book examines the various aspects of language teaching, it will at the same time examine the challenges that learners face with each of these aspects. My hope is that English teachers will not only gain a better understanding of these challenges, but also become more skilled themselves as language learners. This focus on language learning is an attempt to encourage and help nonnative-English-speaking teachers fully exploit one of their greatest assets—their rich experience as language learners.

Practicality

Finally, the emphasis in this book is on practicality. While important theories of language learning and teaching will be introduced throughout the book, they will be introduced and explained only as far as they have direct and practical value for language teachers. However, while theory (i.e., academic theory) is not emphasized in this book, theorizing is. English teaching is not a mechanical task in which you can follow a simple set of prescribed steps and expect good results. English teaching requires you to theorize a great deal: you need to be able to analyze a situation (e.g., the needs of students, the expectations of your school, the strengths and weaknesses of your textbook) and then make the best choices possible with regard to the goals you set, the methods you use, how you use in-class time, and so forth. In other words, from a practical perspective, what you need to develop is skill in analyzing and strategizing.

A Note on Terminology

In writing this book, one of the knottiest problems has been the question of terminology. There is a considerable and growing body of literature related to the special concerns of English teachers who are not native speakers of English, and in this literature these teachers are often referred to as *nonnative-English-speaking teachers* (NNESTs). This is in contrast to native-English-speaking teachers (NESTs). This terminology is somewhat controversial, and not all nonnative-English-speaking teachers are comfortable with it.² I must admit that I am not very happy with the term NNEST because it defines the majority of the world's English teachers by the one quality that they lack rather than by qualities that they possess in particular abundance.

Given that terms such as *native speaker* and *nonnative speaker*, and acronyms such as NNEST and NEST, are widely used and that even the TESOL caucus of teachers for whom English is a second language refers to itself as Nonnative English Speakers in TESOL Caucus, I sometimes use these terms and acronyms in the following chapters. However, more often I simply use the term *local teacher* to refer to teachers who are native to the country where they teach but not native speakers of English, and the term *foreign teacher* to refer to native-English-speaking (or near-native-speaking) teachers who have come from other countries. I have made this choice for two reasons. First, in many EFL settings the categories *local teachers* and *foreign teachers* are virtually the same as the categories *nonnative speaker* and *native speaker*; local teachers are virtually all NNESTs, and any NESTs present are foreign teachers.³ Secondly, the audience of teachers for which this book is intended is not defined simply by whether or not they are native speakers of English. Instead, these teachers are defined just as much by the fact that they work in an EFL context to which they are native; in a sense, they are native speakers of the local culture and have an insider's understanding of the cultural context where they work as well as an insider's understanding of the students they teach. So, while the term is admittedly somewhat imprecise, I feel *local teacher* captures these diverse qualities better than a term that refers merely to whether or not English is a teacher's first language.

² See Braine (1999, xvii) for a discussion of the difficulties he faced when deciding on an appropriate name for the caucus within the TESOL organization that eventually took the name the Nonnative English Speakers in TESOL Caucus.

³ Of course, some foreign teachers are NNESTs. However, in many cases such teachers have near-native command of English, so in the Expanding Circle setting they tend to function more or less like NESTs.

In writing this book, one limitation I face is that I am not a local English teacher myself and cannot write from that perspective. Writing as a local teacher to other local teachers is a task that I must leave to others. What I can claim is that I am an experienced language teacher who is familiar with the EFL setting and tries to the best of my ability to address the concerns of local teachers working in EFL settings. In short, while I cannot write *as* a local English teacher, at least I can try to write *to* local English teachers in a way that seriously takes their special characteristics and concerns into consideration. To the extent that I can identify with and empathize with local English teachers and their concerns, I have gained this ability through my long experience as a language learner and through my modest experience as a teacher of Chinese—my second language—and as a writer of curriculum and teaching materials for that language.

A second limitation I face is the reality that my teaching experience has predominantly been with students who are university-aged or older. While much of what is said in this book would apply reasonably well to teaching English to secondary school students, I feel that teaching English to children presents a rather different set of challenges with which I have little expertise. Therefore, I confine my focus to English teaching for adolescents and adults.

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