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LANG2900

*Reflections on Foreign Language Teaching from the Vantage Point of a Nonnative Speaker*

As I awaited my turn for personal introductions during the first day of our Pedagogy seminar, I soon realized that I was the only one in our class teaching foreign language as a nonnative speaker. It was the first time that this separation from my peers resonated profoundly with me. The challenge of teaching as a nonnative speaker was one that seemed obvious to me — French had always been my passion and to be able to share that love for a language and culture different than my own, was a privilege in and of itself. Throughout my past experience teaching, I noticed that my status as a nonnative speaker of French put me in an advantageous position, allowing me to establish and foster strong connections with my students. I became aware of this sense of unity not only in the classroom, but also during office hours; students would frequently come to me with questions pertaining to studying abroad, living in the French House on campus, or even the possibility of pursuing French as their undergraduate major. That being said, the opportunity to reflect back upon these experiences has allowed me to become increasingly aware of the many privileges of teaching French as a nonnative speaker. While emulation of the native speaker's communicative skills is undoubtedly the ultimate goal in the foreign language classroom, there are many benefits to less “idealized” status of the nonnative speaker that I believe are a topic worthy of discussion.

While the questioned validity of the native speaker model for foreign language study has received more attention over the past few decades, this hasn't always been the case. In fact, it was not until 1985, that the controversial book, *The Native Speaker Is Dead!* written by Thomas Paikeday,

questioned the overarching concept of the native speaker, suggesting that perhaps the native/non-native speaker binary is one that truly does not exist. Prior to the publication of Paikeday's book (one that he had to publish autonomously due to the vexed nature of the subject), linguist Charles Ferguson commented about this topic in a rather contradictory fashion; his contrasting arguments perhaps foreshadowing the complexity of the topic at hand. In 1983 in a paper entitled, "Language Planning and Language Change", Ferguson suggests that "Linguists... have long given a special place to the native speaker as the only true and reliable source of language data," but then followed this commentary up with, "the whole mystique of native speaker and mother tongue should preferably be quietly dropped from the linguist's set of professional myths about language" (vii). While the arguments on either side can be debated at great length, what I feel is most important, and what I would like to further discuss within the context our Language pedagogy seminar, are the opportunities that lie for a nonnative speaking teacher in the college classroom setting. In what ways can a teacher in this position, much like myself, use what would traditionally be considered a "handicap" to his or her advantage? What types of activities can he or she employ in the classroom that will highlight the positive aspects of this trait? And, perhaps most importantly so, how can he or she both effectively and accurately teach the culture of the target language from the position of a foreigner?

Anne Reynolds-Case provides a strong argument for this topic in her comparative study of nonnative speaking language teachers, entitled "Exploring How Non-native Teachers Can Use Commonalities with Students to Teach the Target Language". In this article, she explains that "When the teacher is also a member of that community, a connection of solidarity may form between student and teacher, resulting in the teacher using the inclusive personal pronoun *we* when referring to the students' and teacher's L1" (Reynolds-Case, 529). From a psychological standpoint, students that are prone to anxiety in the foreign language classroom, may benefit from this augmented sense of unity. By promoting a shared commonality, especially one that is as potent as this, the teacher can foster a

connection with his or her students in ways that a native speaker may not be able to do. For instance, by addressing the class using the pronoun “we”, the students feel a shared identity with the teacher, associating one and another within the same cultural and linguistic community. That sense of solidarity not only cultivates positivity and encouragement, but it allows the instructor to teach aspects of the target language that may not be as obvious to a native speaker. For example, in the French language, the mastering of partitive, definite and indefinite articles is an area of great confusion for many native English speakers. Alternatively, with French native speakers, the reasoning behind choosing the correct article is sometimes harder to explain; it is a concept engrained into their learning of the mother tongue since childhood. In this case, if a language teacher is able to pinpoint such crucial areas of difficulty from the perspective of a nonnative speaker, they are more likely to be able to give concrete reasoning for such grammar points to a L2 learner with the same linguistic background.

Additionally, with the great deal of attention placed on the relations between anxiety and learning success in the language classroom, I would be remiss not to address the positive impact that nonnative speaking instructors may have on their shy or anxiety-prone students. While motivation is identified as a predictor of language learning success — a motivated learner, according to Gardner and McIntyre (1993) as one who “wants to achieve a particular goal, devotes considerable effort to achieve this goal, and experiences in the activities associated with achieving this goal” — anxiety in the classroom can have adverse effects (Gardner and McIntyre, 2). The negative relationship between anxiety and learning success is salient; multiple studies corroborate Stephen Krashen’s Affective Filter hypothesis stating that “Language learning must take place in an environment where learners are ‘off the defensive’ and their affective filter (anxiety) is low in order for the input to be noticed and gain access to the learners’ thinking” (Krashen, 127). That being said, it is perhaps within this context of language learning anxiety, that a nonnative speaking teacher can use this commonality to relate to his

or her students, thus creating an environment that is both comfortable and encouraging for the anxiety-prone student.

In an article entitled “The Privilege of the Nonnative Speaker”, written by Claire Kramersch in 1997, she demonstrates the multiple opportunities to teach culture, as well as the poetic functions of language through means of the foreign tongue. In this article, she gives an example of a 1992 advertisement from the Bon Marché Rive Gauche in Paris, to teach French in foreign countries. The advertisement (pictured below) depicts a fashionable woman holding a credit card with the following slogan above her: “Rive Gauche, il existe encore des privilèges que nul ne souhaite abolir” (“On the Left Bank, there are still some privileges that no one wants to abolish”). For a native speaker of French, this ad alludes to August 4, 1789: the date that the nobility abolished its birthrights on the altar of the Revolution. Additionally, the phrase “l’abolition des privilèges” is used frequently in French history books and the detail of the “Rive Gauche” conjures up images of social justice demonstrations. What Kramersch points out is the multiple interpretations of the ad and how, depending on a reader’s demographic and native language, the glorification of French history in the ad loses its meaning and thus, effectiveness. She explains, “If the ad is used to teach French around the world, the diversity of potential readings will increase. Native and nonnative speakers will find in it different confirmations of their worldview and different definitions of privilege, right, and prerogative” (Kramersch, 362). By highlighting these differences in the classroom, the deep-rooted values of a culture and a society are not only unveiled but they are taught in an implicit fashion — becoming more effectively engrained in the student’s mind. What I also enjoy about this example, is the use of real-life material — not only is it an authentic advertisement from a well-known department store in Paris, but the context of shopping with a credit card is translatable across cultures and generations. An advertisement of this nature has the ability to make one stop and reflect upon one’s own culture and values — an American student may wonder what a successful advertisement in the

United States looks like. Does the American culture place as much value on national history within the context of a retail credit card? How do the two cultures differ in that regard, and what, if anything, do they share in common? A comparative analysis of the two is not only culturally relevant and thought-provoking, but it promotes open-ended meaningful discussion. At the collegiate level, it is important to not only focus the fundamental skills of language learning (i.e. grammar, reading, writing, speaking), but it is essential to promote critical thinking and analysis to keep the students engaged and challenged.



Courtesy of the Bon Marché Rive Gauche and of Opéra.

*(Image cited from Kramsch, pg. 361)*

While there is an undeniable privilege associated with the native speaker of the L2 being taught, I believe that the opportunities that lie for nonnative speakers in this field are a topic worth discussing and researching further. As so eloquently put by Kramsch, “Users of tongues other than their own can reveal unexpected ways of dealing with the cross-cultural clashes they encounter as they migrate between languages. Their appropriation of foreign languages enables them to construct linguistic and cultural identities in the interstices of national languages and on the margins of monolingual speakers’

territories” (Kramsch, 368). To see the potential that arises from the perspective of what was originally thought to be a disadvantage in the field of language study, is not only encouraging, but it opens the door for undiscovered methods of self-expression and expansion into the realm of cultural identities.

### Works Cited

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