

Nonnative speaker teachers of English: Challenges and prospects



An interview with George Braine

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Issues surrounding nonnative speakers of English have been gaining a great deal of attention over the last decade in the field of ELT. In this interview, Georg Braine, a leading expert in this area of research, talks about the development of the Non-native Speaker (NNS) Movement, the challenges that NNS teachers face, and the prospects that hold for NNS teachers. With over 40 years of experience in ELT, he is best known as the founder of the NNS Movement and the founding Chair of the Nonnative Speakers Caucus in the TESOL organization. His website can be found at <georgebraine.com>.

ELT分野ではここ10年ほど、英語の非母語話者(NNS)に関する議論が大きな注目を集めている。インタビューでは、この研究分野の第一人者であるGeorg Braineが、非母語話者運動(NNS Movement)の発展、NNS教師が直面する課題や将来への展望について語る。氏はELT分野で40年以上の経験を持ち、TESOL学会のNNS Movementの創始者で、非母語話者部会(Nonnative Speakers Caucus)の創設会長としてよく知られている。

Matthew Sung (MS): As the founder of the Nonnative Speaker Movement, can you tell us the rationale of initiating the movement?

George Braine (GB): The origins of the movement can be traced back to the colloquium titled “In their own voices: Non-native speaker professionals in TESOL” that I organized at the TESOL Convention in 1996. The rationale for the colloquium was the fact that researchers (all of them native speakers of English) had been studying nonnative speaker (NNS) English teachers and scholars—on their classroom behavior, their initiation into academic discourse, their publishing strategies—and I thought that NNS teachers and scholars could speak for themselves on these topics. The TESOL Caucus that was formed in 1999 was a direct result of the colloquium.

MS: I know that you are also the founding chair of the Nonnative-speaker English Caucus in the TESOL organization, which was set up in 1999. What are some of the greatest achievements of the caucus?

GB: The major goals of the Caucus were (I use the past tense here because the Caucus has become an Interest Section)

1. To create a nondiscriminatory professional environment for all TESOL members regardless of native language and place of birth,

2. To encourage the formal and informal gatherings of nonnative speakers at TESOL and affiliate conferences,
 3. To encourage research and publications on the role of nonnative speaker teachers in ESL and EFL contexts, and
 4. To promote the role of nonnative speaker members in TESOL and affiliate leadership positions (see the website of Nonnative English Speakers in TESOL Interest Section: nrest.asu.edu for more details).
1. Empathy with their students' difficulties and frustrations in the classroom;
 2. The ability to incorporate their own ESL learning styles into their teaching;
 3. The ability to view English from the perspective of NNS. (They have learned grammar, not acquired it unconsciously, and are therefore able to explain it. This can be referred to as "language awareness", "metalinguistic awareness", and "sensitivity to the language") and

I believe that the second, third, and fourth goals have been achieved. We formed a TESOL Caucus (which has now become an Interest Section), and also promoted the NNS message at various TESOL affiliates both in the United States and other countries. More than one hundred publications on NNS issues, many of them based on research, have come out since the movement began and thereby creating a new area of scholarship in applied linguistics. Two TESOL Presidents (Jun Liu and Brock Brady) in the past 10 years have been leaders of the NNS movement, and we have also seen the election of movement activists to other responsible positions in TESOL and other organizations. The most significant achievement has been the empowerment of NNS English teachers. Unfortunately, a nondiscriminatory professional environment (the first goal) is still in the making. Like sexism and racism, it will stay with us for years to come.

MS: Where do you see the NNS movement heading in the next ten years?

GB: In the next ten years, I hope the message of the NNS movement could be spread to every country and community where English is taught as a second or foreign language. The movement must blaze new trails, publicizing its mission to all reaches of ELT, generating new areas of research, and inspiring new leaders in ELT.

MS: What do you think are the greatest assets of nonnative teachers of English?

GB: NNS teachers apply their experience in learning English as a second language when they teach English (*a characteristic which no NS teacher can claim*). This is done in four ways. The teachers' display

4. The ability to relate L2 learning theories to their own learning of English. (Teachers' experiences inform their beliefs and in turn influence their teaching. Thus, when theories they encounter in teacher training reflect their own experiences as language learners, the two blend smoothly in their classroom practices. This ability, to place theory within the context of one's own learning, is not available to NS English teachers (see Ellis, 2002, for more details).

MS: Over the last decade, do you think the status of nonnative teachers of English around the world has changed?

GB: In the past, NNS English teachers were generally regarded as second rate, a notch below native speaker English teachers. This attitude is changing now, mainly because NNS have found a powerful voice in the field of ELT, through their academic publications and presentations, leadership, and through advocacy.

MS: As a nonnative teacher of English yourself, what are some of the challenges which nonnative teachers of English are still facing?

GB: NNS English teachers face discrimination in finding English teaching positions, especially in more affluent Asian countries. Being a Caucasian is considered the main qualification to teach English, and some who obtain employment as English teachers have no teaching qualifications at all. Many NNS English teachers have their own shortcomings. Their proficiency in English needs improvement.

MS: What would you suggest to nonnative teachers of English around the world to deal with these challenges?

GB: To form professional associations (not only trade unions) and stand up to unfair hiring practices. Improve their own English proficiency, mainly through reading. We are not merely users of English; we are teachers and need to master the language. The acquisition of a language is a lifelong process and many English teachers seem to overlook that, making little or no effort to improve their proficiency.

MS: As a former journal editor and an expert in second language writing, do you have any suggestions for novice writers who are trying to get published in the field of TESOL?

GB: In fact, I wrote on this topic to *The Language Teacher* about 10 years ago, and have written and spoken about it more since then. First, novice writers should be aware of the more than fifty applied linguistics journals that are available. Many novice writers are only aware of *TESOL Quarterly*, which by the way has a very low acceptance rate. Novice writers must read journal articles before they can write any. By reading, one becomes familiar with the focus of the journal (writing, reading, language acquisition, etc.) and the type of article accepted by each journal. Reading also makes us better writers. Third, no article is accepted for publication without revision, and writers must be prepared to revise. Finally, articles are also rejected outright fairly often. Novice writers must not be dejected by such disappointments and must learn to keep trying.

MS: I know that you have recently published a new book titled, *Nonnative Speaker English Teachers: Research, Pedagogy, and Professional Growth* (Braine, 2010; see Sung, 2010)? Can you tell us about it (see, e.g., Sung, 2010)?

GB: The NNS movement is more than a decade old now, and I thought it was time to reflect on the growth of the movement, summarize the research, highlight again the challenges faced by NNS English teachers, and speculate on how the movement could grow in the future.

MS: You have recently retired from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. What are your future plans? Are you going to do more research on nonnative speaker teachers of English?

GB: I have no academic plans. I intend to travel and to spend more time with the people I like and in the places I enjoy. As for the NNS movement, we are fortunate in having chosen energetic and enthusiastic young leaders to follow in our footsteps. So, I am happy to take a back seat in the movement.

MS: Finally, what do you think will be the future direction of research on nonnative speaker teachers of English?

GB: In the past decade, the growth in research on nonnative speaker English teachers has been phenomenal; in fact, our movement has created an entirely new area of research. But, much remains to be done. We need to move beyond comparisons of native speaker and nonnative speaker teachers or self-perceptions. We need ethnographic research on the lives of individual nonnative speaker English teachers from around the world. What role does English play in their lives? Do they develop as English teachers or stagnate due to lack of motivation or support from the local system? We only have anecdotal evidence now so there's room for much research. Another issue is that most studies on nonnative speaker teachers have been conducted by nonnative speakers themselves. Because the credibility of such studies could be challenged, we need to involve native speaker colleagues as co-investigators.

MS: Thank you very much for your time, and wish you all the best.

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