An English Teacher Struggle to Establish Voice in the Periphery

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Abstract: This paper explores my identity formation and the struggle to establish voice as a non-native teacher working in the periphery. While publication on non-native speakers' struggle into academia has been growing in the West, such publication is rare in the periphery where I have been working as an English language teacher for the last seven years. My personal reflection has shown that similar to their non-native colleagues working in the Center, non-native teachers also experienced marginalization that have fostered a perception that their nono-nativeness is a drawback. This leads to an identity of the non-native teacher s into a producer of errors and second-rate citizens despite years of learning English. From this personal narrative, I learned that it is crucial for teacher education programs to address issues of native/non-natives as an attempt to unfasten destructive identity constructions that non-native speakers are accustomed to.

Key words: non-native teachers, identity fastening, teachers in the periphery, critical consciousness

Recently several people have written about the non-native educators with varying focuses. Some have focused on the experiences and struggles faced by non-native educators (Braine, 1999; Kramsch & Lam, 1999; Samimy and Brutt-Griffler, 1999) or non-native women educators (Amin, 1999). Others take a closer look at the multiliteracies experiences of highly successful second language professional academics specializing in language teaching (Bhatia, 2001; Canagarajah, 2001; Connor, 1999; Cohen, 2001; Kubota, 2001a, 2001b). Recently focus has been given to the evolving identities of the non-native English educators (see, among others, Guo, 2006; Pavlenko, 2003). Although they are highly idiosyncratic narratives of past and present struggles and successes, they reveal a

common characteristic. They all attempt to negotiate identities and subject positioning other than passively submitting to the traditional dichotomies of native/non-native speaker.

If the voices of non-native educators articulating their concerns teaching in English-speaking countries has been growing in number, the voice of non-native educators in the periphery is rare. The absence of such voices may be wrongly assumed to mean that the non-native educators do not experience marginalization as their fellow non-native educators in the Center. While I would not deny that this may be true in some contexts, it is not true in many EFL contexts (Lin, Wang, Akamatsu, & Riazi, 2002) such as in Indonesia where I have been an English teacher at a teacher training department for the last seven years. If the awareness of World English is growing in the Center due to the vast publication in such topics, in the periphery many teachers (Zacharias, 2007), students and parents continue to perceive English as belonging to the traditional English as a native language (ENL) countries.

Okazaki (2003) defines critical consciousness as "the ability to realize and question the reproduction of socio-cultural and historical injustice, as well as power relationships in one's own culture, the target culture, and global cultures" (p. 181). This present article can be viewed as the process of my critical consciousness. It attempts to critically analyze my own autobiographical narratives as a format to tell my stories of learning and teaching English in different sociocultural contexts. I explore my encounter and experiences with English both as a learner and a teacher just as I construct and perform through it new voices, identities and subject positioning (Gee, Allen, & Clinton, 2001).

FORMAL ENCOUNTER WITH ENGLISH

My first formal encounter with English was in junior high school. I was really excited because I thought I could learn English, which was considered as the prestigious language in Indonesia. For me, English represented economic power. Most people that I knew who had good jobs could speak English. My early learning of English was full of memorizing: the irregular verbs, vocabulary items, idioms and the two-word verbs. I was a really motivated learner. I wrote down the words on the flash cards and brought them everywhere I went. I enunciated them when memorizing. I loved the sounds of the words. After a few months, we learned to put

words together into sentences. Instead of memorizing, now our day was full of drilling different tenses. We practiced by doing endless exercises on how to alter one tense into another. After a few months, I got really bored and became less and less motivated to learn English.

The narrative shows how approaches play a great role in students' motivation. The way English was taught has significantly decreased my motivation to learn it. The heavy focus on linguistic elements had reduced the language into merely a subject of study and not a language for communication.

THE BIRTH OF NON-NATIVE LEARNER IDENTITIES IN THE ENGLISH ONLY POLICY

Why would I want to be an English teacher despite my low motivation to learn English in high school? It was simple. I was not accepted in the two architect departments. I was not thrilled with becoming a teacher. In Indonesia, the teaching profession was well known for its low pay and more pain although teachers enjoyed a relatively high status in the society. If I was less excited about entering the English department, my parents were thrilled. They believed English was the language of the future. Due to my respect for them, I applied to one of the best teacher-education programs in the country. As my parents said "there's no way to know English better than to be a teacher of English."

There were striking differences in the ways English was taught in high school and university. In high schools we used textbooks produced locally and written by Indonesians whereas in college the materials were mostly produced by well-known publishers such as Oxford Universities Press and Macmillan. If in high schools English was taught using Indonesian/Javanese as the medium of instructions, in university English was the medium of instruction although some local teachers occasionally joked in Indonesian. If in high schools English stayed within the four walls of the classroom, in university English had more authority. Student activities, announcements, and student-teacher conferences were all in English.

Several SLA theorists have expressed varying concerns on the exclusive use of English in education (Auerbach, 1993; Canagarajah, 1999; Cook, 2001; Prodromou, 2001). Canagarajah (1999) and Phillipson (1992) argue that monolingual approach is based on primarily political reasons

and not linguistic. According to Cook (2001), administering a monolingual approach in a classroom where both students and teacher share the same mother tongue deny, if not silence, students' bilingual identities. Canagarajah (1999) further adds that the monolingual approach gives the impression that students' L2 cannot co-exist with their previous language(s). The use of students' mother tongue can be a lubricant to bridge previous language learning experience to the new one (Seidlhofer, 1999) and reduces students' anxiety (Auerbach, 1993). Despite the positive role of mother tongue in the classroom, Merritt, Cleghorn, Abgai, and Bunyi (1992) warns teachers to be selective in using it and not see it as an easy option. However, based on my experience, the difference between judicious use of mother tongue and an easy option was hard to determine.

Despite the varying concerns about the monolingual approach, the experience learning English by monolingual approach was somewhat positive for me. In fact many students often equated the teacher's use of English in the classroom with ability in teaching. Favored teachers would be those who used English all the time. There were several reasons why students had favorable attitudes toward the English-only policy. First, English is studied as a required school subject since junior high school and there is very little opportunity to use English outside the classroom. Hence, the use of the mother tongue in the classroom may be seen as undermining opportunities for the students to use and be exposed to English. Second is related to the fact that Indonesia has never been colonialized by the English-speaking countries. Thus, students and the society at large have more positive attitudes toward the use of it.

The use of English can also be perceived as an easy option. Indonesia is a multilingual country and most people at least speak two languages: their local language and the national language, Bahasa Indonesia. In a multicultural classroom such as this, whose mother tongue should be used? Should a teacher use Javanese as the mother tongue of the largest ethnic group in the country? Should Bahasa Indonesia be used although not many people feel emotional attachment to it? What about other ethnic groups in the classroom, how can they be represented? Whereas the choice of inappropriate mother tongue can lead to hidden ethnic resistance in the classroom, the choice of English, I presumed, is easy and safe because it was seen as neutral and even favorable, in the given context.

My growing use of English has made English part of my identity. I started to associate different purposes for each language. Interestingly, I

tended to use English to express my emotions. Although both Indonesian and Javanese have words for emotions, I felt less guilty and still considered myself as a proper Indonesian if I used English when I was angry. Wierzbicka (2003) states that in Javanese society, the management of emotion becomes one's primary concern. In this culture, people are expected to be able to guard their feelings. Expressing feelings publicly is considered *kasar* or improper. In other words, "emotional equanimity, a certain flatness of affect", as Wierzbicka (2003, p. 325) puts it, is the mark of truly *alus* [refined] and highly valued in the society.

I find Reed's (2001) notions of identity fastening and unfastening is particularly relevant here. Reed asserts "identities are fastened by the categories that we have available and by the ways that we submit to those categories and subject others to them" (p. 329). She explains that an act of identity fastening secures a sense of belonging for an individual. Meanwhile, identities are always subject to being unfastened as individuals are in constant contact with new cultural values and norms as they move from one place to another. As language and identities were inseparable, my identities were always fastened by the Javanese and Indonesian cultural values since I tried to behave according to the accepted values of the two languages. However, English has enabled me to unfasten some of the cultural values of the two languages. I felt I could be more straightforward; something that might be considered inappropriate in my two other languages. It needs to be pointed out here that I was not suggesting that the process of identity fastening and unfastening is fixed. In fact, as pointed out by Reed (2001), they are progressive. They are "continuously done to us and by us" (p. 337).

CONFLICTING IDENTITIES: AM I A TEACHER OR A LEARNER OF ENGLISH?

After graduating, I became a teacher at my own department. Similar to Samimy and Brutt-Griffler's participants (1999), I felt that the preservice teacher education did not lay adequate foundation to be an English teacher, particularly a nonnative English teacher, although I did learn several TESOL methodology courses such as Course Design, Teaching and Learning Strategy and Language Testing. However, they were still much limited compared to Linguistic courses and language courses (Speaking, Listening, Reading, Extensive Reading, Pronunciation and Writing). This

lack of preparation has conditioned me to teach English in the same way as I was taught. Despite my limited knowledge and experience in teaching, I never felt embarrassed about being a teacher. I was content with my new identity especially because a teacher has a higher status in Indonesia.

If I was certain of my teacher identity, I was not sure of my *English* teacher identity. This was because there was a clear division of labor between native and non-native teachers. Native speaker teachers taught courses dealing more with language production such as pronunciation, speaking, and writing. Only very few non-native speakers taught pronunciation; those who spoke like a native speaker. In addition, native-speakers were treated as language consultants and experts. Each time I wrote tests or handouts, they needed to go through the screening process conducted by native-speaker teachers to make sure they illustrated 'perfect' English and did not expose students' to bad model of English use. Although this was a good practice of proof reading, I later learned that the native-speaker themselves, perhaps due to their varying expertise and degrees, were inconsistent in their language feedback. What appeared to be appropriate language use for one native speaker was not shared by other native speakers. The unidirectional relationship, instead of a bidirectional one, between native speakers and non-native speakers has cultivated the belief that non-native speakers needed to be 'corrected' to enter the professions. Such practice has been a foreground for my identity as a non-native speaker rather than a teacher of English.

If the preservice education does not sufficiently provide a foundation of being a teacher of English, it gave barely any basis to be a *non-native* educator. Hoodfar (1992) points out that most minority teachers, and especially those who are new to the profession, have to invest a great deal of energy in establishing themselves as legitimate teachers, both in the eyes of their students and other teachers. She adds that similar to most other minority teachers at the early stages of their career is "even less secure than junior White male or female teachers" (p. 315) (see also Amin, 1999). My experiences were similar to those of Hoodfar (1992) who said that her authority and knowledge were commonly challenged. The lack of addressing native/non-native educators in teacher-training department has led to the disempowered positioning of non-native teachers. Ironically, it was the only subject positioning I was familiar with.

Following Kubota (2001a), our consciousness of being a non-native speaker has been dichotomized by long-standing discursive practices. The

attitude of non-native teachers as producers of 'bad' English coupled with the absence of discussion of the positive contribution that non-native educators can bring to the profession have subconsciously maintained and fostered the non-native identity as a drawback. It makes these teachers self-marginalize (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, 2003) themselves and can lead to their unstable status in the ELT profession (Braine, 1999).

THE BIRTH OF ENGLISH TEACHER IDENTITIES

After teaching in the department for two years, I was offered a scholarship to study in Thailand. At first I was unsure about the program. I thought why I would study English in Thailand. I told the deputy rector about my concerns. She explained that although it was in Thailand all the teachers were native-speakers of English. Once I heard the word 'native speaker', I was convinced. I thought it was a good program since native-speakers would be teaching it. I never realized that I was subscribing myself to the native speaker fallacy (Phillipson, 1992).

As expected many people questioned my decision to take a master's degree in a non-English speaking country. One of the senior lecturers in the department asked me why I would not just wait for another scholarship so I could study in Australia or the United States. People always raised their eyebrows when they knew I went to Thailand to study English. "Studying English in Thailand? Really? Why?" I explained to them patiently that although it was in Thailand, all my teachers were native speakers. I realized that people, including myself, continued to equate *learning to teach* English with learning English and thus, confined non-native speakers as forever language learners. This view strengthens Reed's (2001) argument that "identities are fastened by the categories that we have available by the ways that we submit to those categories and subject others to them." (p. 329).

In Thailand, what I learned was totally different. I took a course entitled World Englishes. This course was an eye-opener for me particularly because the positive contribution that non-native speakers could bring to the profession was highlighted. I was empowered to know that more and more applied linguists are challenging the native speaker fallacy. Cook (1999, 2001) suggests that bilingual teachers may be better models than the model embodied by native speakers. Bilingual teachers, by definition, have command of two languages. Furthermore, they have gone

through the same stages or "L1 filter" (Seidlhofer, 1999, p. 238) as their students. Therefore they know what it means to learn a second language themselves. Seidlhofer (1999) refers to bilingual teachers as 'double agents' who have the following advantages to offer:

a. They are at home with the language(s) and culture(s) they share with their students, but they also know the relevant terrain inhabited by the target language. Thus, they are suitable to be agents facilitating learning by mediating between the different languages and cultures through appropriate pedagogy.
b. Since they were once learners of the language themselves, bilingual teachers usually develop a high degree of consciousness and declarative knowledge of the internal organization of the code itself.

Britten (1985) also shares a similar view. According to him, the ideal teacher is the person who "has near-native speaker proficiency in the foreign language, and comes from the same linguistic and cultural background as the learners" (p. 116). He thinks that bilingual teachers of English may in fact be better qualified than native speaker, if they have gone through the laborious process of acquiring English as a second language and if they offer insights into the linguistic and cultural needs of their learners. Success in learning a foreign language may correlate highly with success in teaching (p. 116).

This new awareness has strengthened my English teacher's identity. Prior to knowing the positive contributions non-native speakers could bring to the profession, I was unfastening my non-native identities as producers of errors and second-rate teachers. In fact, I subconsciously tried to transform myself to become a native speaker. I falsely believed that native-speaker would be accepted in the academy. The World Englishes course certainly helped me to establish and strengthen my identity as a non-native English teacher. I was not ashamed of my non-nativeness and viewed it as a resource to be more empathetic toward my students. The new realization has enabled me to unfasten destructive identities positioning which I tried to apply by making my English lessons a means to empower student non-native bilingual identities.

BRINGING THE CONCEPT OF WORLD ENGLISHES IN THE CLASSROOM: ACCOMMODATING BILINGUAL NON-NATIVE IDENTITIES IN THE CLASSROOM

From my experience, I learned that pedagogy oriented toward World Englishes has a great effect in developing student voice and confidence as non-native speakers. This is corroborated by Mantero (2007). He notes, "whether we approach pedagogy as a way of positioning students for further development or as a method of challenging Western models of instruction, it is clear that instructors have the tools to construct, produce, reform and sustain identity development in second language learners" (p. 375). With this belief, I aimed to integrate the concept of World Englishes into my classroom with two main purposes in mind. The first was to increase students' confidence as a bilingual user of English and second, to introduce various Englishes in the classroom.

I accommodated the first purpose by providing opportunities to discuss about being a non-native speaker exclusively in my TESOL methodology classes as well as integratively in my other classes. The discussion was vital as it brought forward the non-native identities that so far have been silenced or unaccommodated in the classroom. According to Vandrick (1997), if certain identity is never spoken of, it may create the impression that there is something shameful about that identity. Thus, he further states that when a teacher discusses a topic or an identity openly, it demystifies the identity; it somehow makes the identity more usual, more matter of fact. As I expected students were enthusiastic about the topic. They shared their concerns to get a well-paid job as a non-native English teacher. Other than sharing the realities of being a non-native educator, I tried to raise awareness of the advantages of being a non-native teacher educator to raise their confidence of being a future English teacher.

For the second purpose, I exposed students to texts (drama scripts, poems, and stories) written by bilinguals writers such as *Mak Su* (Ramli Ibrahim), *Kaledioscope Eyes* (Theresa Tan), *Fesitval* (Kenneth Wee), *Listen Mr Oxford Don* (John Agard) and *Everything in English* (Munyadziwa Hazel Ngwana). Unlike the successful implementation of the first purpose, students did not seem to have favorable attitudes towards these Englishes. They mentioned that these Englishes were not real and the substandard of standard Englishes. In fact, my student attitudes corroborated what Amin (1994, 1999) has found in his pilot studies that

accents associated with White English-speaking countries of the First World such as Britain, the United States, and Canada have a higher status than accents associated with non-White countries such as India, Kenya and Singapore. Many students also explicitly stated that they wanted to speak like a native speaker for employment concerns. They believed that high-paying jobs expect native-speaker accents although there has not been any empirical data to support this. I realized that my attempts to introduce the concept of World Englishes has challenged their long-held belief (English is the NS language). This supports Reed's argument. He argues that "identity unfastening … might be perceived as either constructive or destructive from the standpoint of the individual" (Reed, 2001, p. 329).

Despite students' resistance, I kept on using texts from new Englishes in addition to texts produced by native-speakers. I perceived part of non-native teacher identity as an agent of change. My aim was to show them that real English use might not be the same as those represented in the classroom. The use of different texts from different Englishes was not meant to represent 'good' English (no matter what the definition of good English is) but rather to show the dynamic use of Englishes. As some of these Englishes (e.g. Singapore, Malaysia and the Phillipines) are geographically in the immediate vicinity, this practice was needed to raise awareness and develop favorable attitudes toward these Englishes.

CONCLUSION

What have I tried to highlight by analyzing my personal narratives? I feel that I am still a learner of academic discourse, continuously experimenting to find suitable voice and negotiating suitable non-native teacher identity. I also feel that I have not been provided with adequate pedagogical basis to help me appropriate identity in sometimes competing discourse practice especially because I work in a community which does not accommodate much meta talk about non-native teacher identities. The theories handed to me during my graduate studies in Thailand have not always understood the unique challenges confronting a periphery teacher like me. However, there are some important lessons that I have learned during negotiating these identities that might inspire others.

First, the realizations and reflective insights derived from years of learning English and how to teach English have helped me to develop a keener appreciation of the strengths of a non-native teacher. Thomas

(1999) observes that "we usually learn to value what we see valued and to undermine what we see undermined" (p. 11). Prior to expecting others to value non-native teachers, the non-native teachers themselves need to value their non-nativeness and find ways to use it to the fullest. In addition to being double agents (Seidlhofer, 1999), I perceive my role as agent of change in appropriating knowledge from the Center to local contexts in the periphery while theorizing what works in the periphery to inform, if not challenge, knowledge construction originated from the West.

Second, the sociocultural contexts in which the teachers work significantly contribute to the way teachers perceive their non-nativeness. Non-nativeness is an identity filter through which teachers grouped themselves and others. Such identity filter can lead both to constructive or deconstructive identity positioning of the non-native teachers. The challenge, then, is how non-native teachers can see their non-nativeness as a resource. To this end, the teacher education program has a great role in unfastening the subject positioning that non-native students have been accustomed to and create positive qualities to the identity fastening of non-native teachers.

Finally, as bilingual identities are contradictory and a site of struggle (Pierce, 1995; McKay & Wong, 1996; Armour, 2004), I realize that my identities formation will be constantly challenged, fastened and unfastened (Reed, 2001), and even, changed. But these are, after all, the skills and experiences that helped me progress towards a becoming confident non-native English teacher. This is how I have grown to manipulate competing discourses as I attempt to be an agent of change in my own teaching context in the periphery.

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