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This folk merit anew consideration Strategies that NON-NESTs use to maintain their proficiency in English

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ABSTRACT

The case of Non-native English Speaking Teachers (Non-NESTs) teaching English in EFL contexts deserves more attention and research. While it has been argued that these teachers do have their competitive edge, their unique situation has always been underplayed on the notion of the image of a line along which non-natives move towards the native end. The downside of the story is that their linguistic environment is dominated by L1 through life and ridden with errors (student errors when using L2) through work. Yet, they are expected to maintain and improve their proficiency in English and function as perfect models for students. A possible way in which they do this is through strategy use. This study attempts to shed light on the strategies for success local English teachers gradually develop to cope with their unique situation. 23 experienced local teachers of English and 23 advanced non-teachers both Iranian and both balanced by a proficiency test took an 80-item strategy inventory for language learning. The result showed contrastive strategy use for each group. To find out the details of this difference, qualitative analysis was used which highlights the strategies for success which local teachers gradually develop to manage their unique situation.

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Introduction

Among the trends which have recently emerged in ELT, there is a trend which suggests that researchers' attention should be focused on the learner rather than on the teacher. Based on this perspective, the lion's share of the research has been directed toward this aim and there is hardly any scarcity of findings in this end of the continuum. Without trying to deny the importance of the research on the learner, it could justly be argued that the road to the learner leads through the teacher and that teacher-related research should therefore be increased (Medgyes, 1992). This seems to be more than true in EFL contexts where native speaker teachers are either scarce or unavailable. The mere availability of native speakers in such contexts has the advantage of arousing the native versus non-native arguments. In whatever ways these arguments are settled and which conclusions are drawn are less important than the fact that the situation is already reaping the benefits of NESTs and Non-NESTs working together at the same environment. The opposite scenario is a little gloomy and is related to the contradictory situation of non-native English speaking teachers in only-Non-NEST EFL contexts. On the one hand, the linguistic environment in which these teachers live is dominated by L1 and the one in which they work is ridden with errors (student errors when using L2). On the other hand, they are expected to maintain and improve their knowledge of English despite all these adverse winds and function as perfect models for students. A possible way in which they manage to do so is strategy use. This study attempts to shed light on the strategies for success that local English teachers gradually develop to manage their unique situation.

According to a TESOL workshop (2007), although Non-NESTs make up the vast majority of English language teachers in the world, little attention has been given to teacher education

and professional development opportunities targeted to best serve them. Medgyes' (1992, 2001) principle thesis is that both native and non-native English speaking teachers can be equally effective instructors, but they will be effective in different ways and will have different professional identities. In the past decade, much research has been conducted on Non-NEST professional identities, employer, student and native-speaking teacher attitudes towards Non-NESTs, and techniques for better responding to Non-NEST needs in teacher education programs. (Nemtchinova, 2005; Maum, 2002; Davies, 1991) However, many professional development programs are still primarily oriented toward native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), and only recently has attention turned to issues such as Non-NEST best practices and how to provide Non-NESTs with the professional development opportunities needed to implement such practices.

NEST versus NON-NEST Dichotomy

The stereotype that native speaker is better refers to a dichotomy which has prevailed for a long time. People who speak English as their native language have been regarded to have a distinct advantage over those who speak English as a foreign language. In other words, non-native speakers of English are regarded to have a linguistic handicap which makes it hard for them to compete with native speakers on equal terms and this applies to non-native teachers of English as well (Medgyes, 2001). The same stereotype has formed in ELT that takes for granted that a native speaker is by nature the best person to teach his foreign language. The assumption is that "the more proficient, the more efficient" (Medgyes, 1992) which leaves little room for non-native teachers. A significant body of research (Moussu & Llorca, 2008), however, has tried to show the inappropriateness of using a dichotomy approach. The fact is that the number of second and foreign language speakers of

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English far exceeds the number of first language speakers of English. Thus, the English language can no longer be considered the privilege of native speakers (Graddol, 1997). Smith (1983) also pointed out that native speakers need as much help as non-native speakers when using English to interact internationally. Kachru (1986) concludes that English is now the language of those who use it. These users give it a distinct identity in every region. Regarding the NEST versus Non-NEST dichotomy, researchers including Medgyes (1992, 2001) have tried to settle the discussion by arguing that both groups have their own advantages and disadvantages. Moussu and Llurda (2008), on the other hand, have reported the claim of some researchers regarding the existence of a continuum accounting for all possible cases between the two extreme options. While keeping native and non-native distinction intact and acknowledging the fact that both groups of teachers reveal considerable differences in their teaching behavior and that most of the discrepancies are language-related, Medgyes (1992, 2001) does not conclude that non-native-speaking teachers are by definition less efficient. Indeed, he contends that a deficient command of English may even have hidden advantages. The explicit message is that natives and non-natives have an equal chance to become successful teachers, but the routes used by the two groups are not the same.

NON-NEST Advantages and Disadvantages

Medgyes (1992, 2001) proposes six points where a Non-NEST is better than a NEST. These points include serving as imitable models of the successful learner of English, teaching learning strategies more effectively, providing learners with more information about the English language, being more able to anticipate language difficulties, being more empathetic to the needs and problems of their learners and finally, benefitting from sharing the learner's mother tongue. The key point in this regard is the fact that Non-NESTs have been learners of English. They have been successful learners and thus can become models for their students. Reves and Medgyes (1994) point out that NESTs may not be aware of the internal mechanisms operating in the acquisition of a second language since language acquisition was unconscious for them. On the other hand, Medgyes (1992) admits that language competence is the point where non-NESTs are inevitably handicapped. According to Reves and Medgyes (1994), the different areas of difficulty include vocabulary, fluency, pronunciation and grammar. This causes particular tendencies by two groups of teachers. For example, NESTs are more natural and real with language and communication whereas Non-NESTs are more concerned with accuracy and formal features of English. Reves and Medgyes (1994) also observe that while NESTs tend to improvise and not to follow the textbook, Non-NESTs plan their classes more carefully as a way for solving the problem with language proficiency. Regarding this problem, Merino (1997) reports Medgyes (1992) who states that as the Non-NEST is a teacher and a learner at the same time he can use his learning experience in a reflective way in teaching. Thus, he has developed learning strategies that can be useful to his students.

Language Learning Strategies

In view of Medgyes' (1992, 2001) hypothesis that Non-NESTs are advanced learners of English –the language they teach– and assume the role of teacher and learner at the same time and with respect to the fact that the Non-NEST with higher proficiency in English would be the better teacher, the responsibility of maintaining and improving proficiency is on

agenda for Non-NESTs for their professional development. The existing literature considers it as the most important professional duty for Non-NESTs to make linguistic improvements in their English (Medgyes, 2001). On the other hand, it is a truism that people who make use of language learning strategies pick up languages more quickly and effectively than others. Strategy use is an additional factor with a bearing on success beside other factors such as background, motivation, age, intelligence, aptitude, level of education, quality of instruction and so on. As it was mentioned, Non-NESTs can teach learning strategies more effectively; presumably, they should be successful users of the strategies in order to be able to teach them. This study tries to explain Non-NEST proficiency development through strategy use. Among strategy systems, Oxford (1990) has been adopted for the aims of this study. Oxford divides language learning strategies into two main classes, direct and indirect, which are further subdivided into 6 groups. In Oxford's system, metacognitive strategies help learners to regulate their learning. Affective strategies are concerned with the learner's emotional requirements such as confidence, while social strategies lead to increased interaction with the target language. Cognitive strategies are the mental strategies learners use to make sense of their learning, memory strategies are those used for storage of information, and compensation strategies help learners to overcome knowledge gaps to continue the communication.

Proficiency and Language Learning Strategies

Self-reported strategy use has been linked with learner variables such as level of language proficiency (Chamot, 2004). In fact, the picture is much clearer regarding the relationship between language learning strategies and the student's proficiency level. More proficient language learners use a greater variety and often a greater number of learning strategies (Anderson, 2005; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Su (2005) observes that many studies show the mutual relationship between proficiency and language learning strategies, that is, strategy use results from and leads to increased proficiency. Su (2005) concludes that strategies are the causes and the outcomes of improved language proficiency.

Strategy Use and Profession

University major and career position have also been correlated to strategy use but with less attention and clarity of results. Chamot et al. (1987) report that university major has a statistically significant influence on choice of L2 learning strategies. For example, a recent study by Gu (2002) also found strategy differences between arts and science majors. In addition to university major, job position has also been reported to influence language learning strategy choice (Zhenhui, 2005). For example, Ehrman and Oxford (1989) discovered that professional linguists used a wider variety of strategies than adult language learners and native-speaking language teachers who were not trained in linguistics. Motivation and learning style have been suggested as possible explanations for such differences in use of learning strategies by students of various academic majors and jobholders. Different career orientations may result in different motivations to learn a language or influence learning modality preferences which in turn may influence different use of language learning strategies. Although these studies reveal a possible relationship between a particular career and strategy use, it is unclear what the effect of the particular profession of the local English teachers (Non-NESTs) is on the strategies that they use to improve their proficiency in English. In order to investigate this issue, it was first necessary

to establish the difference between strategy use of teachers and non-teachers. After this was done, it was necessary to probe into the specific strategies which these teachers have developed to cope with their unique situation. Thus, there are two principle research questions addressed by this research:

1-Do local English teachers differ from advanced non-teachers in using LLS?

2-If yes, what are the particular strategies for success which local teachers gradually have developed to manage their unique situation?

Method

Participants

The subjects involved in this study were 23 Iranian English teachers and 23 Iranian advanced learners of English who had no experience of teaching English. As it was clear from the literature, sex has a detected effect on strategic performance of the learners. Thus, all subjects were selected from male members of each group. To balance the effect of proficiency, a proficiency test (TOEFL) was administered to each group to select those who had a high proficiency. The subjects in the second group were mostly university students in their twenties. To ensure the effect of teachers' experience, the subjects in the teachers group were selected from experienced teachers working for an average 10 years. Thus, age difference between the teachers group and non-teachers group was a significant drawback. However, the administration of the proficiency test and balancing for proficiency levels was used to modify the effect of age.

Instruments

The proficiency test employed in the present study was adopted from Nelson's TOEFL test. It included 100 items in vocabulary, reading comprehension, structure and written expressions. For practical and administrative reasons, this test lacked a listening comprehension section. The subjects' scores were out of 100. Those who were chosen for the study had obtained more than 85 in this test.

The strategy inventory for language learning was adopted from Oxford's (1990) 80-item questionnaire. This questionnaire is the standard instrumentation in most strategy studies. The questionnaire consisted of 80 statements divided into six categories: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies. The participants were asked to report the frequency of use of each strategy on five Likert-scale multiple-choice options (never or almost never true of me, generally not true of me, somewhat true of me, generally true of me, and always or almost always true of me). In the qualitative part of the study, qualitative methods of data collection, namely, observation, retrospection and interview were used. The open observation was carried out through a 45-day period in two institutes where the project had been initiated. This method was used in a random way to collect data by direct observation of the class which was then going to be crosschecked by data collected from retrospection. Interview was the final phase of examining the data and categorizing it. To derive the characteristics or categories directly from the data without a predetermined scheme, an inductive procedure was adopted (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989).

Procedure

The data were collected during a summer semester in two institutes in Khoy city, Iran. The 23 teachers were teachers of the selected institutes and the 23 non-teacher advanced learners

were higher level students of the selected institutes. After the data were collected by administering the questionnaire, they were analyzed by using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) to answer the first research question. To do this, Chi-square tests were used to examine each SILL item for significant variation by teachers and non-teachers.

As regards the second research question, analysis of the qualitative data included first dealing with part of the data to derive categories or representative characteristics of participants' strategy use. Once the categories or characteristics were identified and sorted, they were applied to the remainder of the data for refinement. As the data analysis continued, the refinement of categories and characteristics continued until commonalities or patterns emerged. In the formula suggested by Young (1997), the inter-coder reliability was 0.84 and the intra-rater reliability was 0.91.

Results

The results of qualitative and quantitative sections of the data analysis have been demonstrated separately in the following. In the quantitative section, the frequency of strategy use by teachers and non-teachers has been reported in two tables. The results of the qualitative section are listed with some examples.

Quantitative Data

Table 1 shows this frequency for teachers in which 17 strategy items have been shown to be more frequently reported by this group and Table 2 shows this frequency for non-teachers in which 9 strategy items are frequent for non-teachers group. The type of these strategies are reported in the second column and as it is clear from the labels, six categories of strategies correlating to the categorization scheme proposed by Oxford (1990) are represented. The six categories include cognitive (COG), compensation (COM), memory (MEM), metacognitive (MET), affective (AFF), and social (SOC). The numbers report the frequency for each group which in Table 1 is more for the teachers and in Table 2 is more for the non-teachers.

Table 1. More frequent strategy use by teachers

Item	Type	Ts	N-Ts
Choose strategies for various learning tasks	MET	19	14
Have clear goals for improving my English skills	MET	14	3
Plan my schedule	MET	18	15
Notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better	MET	21	10
Ask the other person to slow down or repeat	SOC	17	8
Ask English speakers to correct me when I talk	SOC	15	3
Try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English	AFF	19	11
Write down my feelings in a language learning dairy	AFF	14	1
Write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English	COG	12	7
Pay attention to listening and speaking	COG	17	10
Make summary of new English material	COG	15	8
Try to find patterns in English	COG	18	13
Revise written work to improve writing	COG	20	9
Look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English	COG	11	7
Use new word in a sentence to remember it	MEM	21	11
Review English texts often	MEM	23	15
Use circumlocutions	COM	14	2

Item= questionnaire item, Type= strategy type, Ts= frequency of teachers' use of strategies, N-Ts= frequency of non-teachers' use of strategies

Table 2. More frequent strategy use by non-teachers

Item	Type	Ts	N-Ts
Analyze grammar rules and linguistic details	COG	17	21
Watch English language TV shows in English or go to movies spoken in English	COG	15	19
Find meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand	COG	17	19
First skim an English passage then go back and read carefully	COG	13	18
Associate new material with already known	MEM	14	19
Associate word with its synonyms and antonyms	MEM	17	20
Make guesses to understand unfamiliar English words	COM	14	16
Try to find out how to be a better learner of English	MET	9	15
Avoid being discouraged by poor exam results	AFF	2	19

Item= questionnaire item, Type= strategy type, Ts= frequency of teachers' use of strategies, N-Ts= frequency of non-teachers' use of strategies

Qualitative Data

The qualitative section of the study includes the results of transcription and categorization by analytic induction carried out over observation, retrospection and interview data. As a result, it was found that a number of strategies can be identified which lie on a continuum:

- more inclined to teaching or more inclined to learning
- as part of life or teaching job
- used alone or in-group

Also use of more metacognitive, affective and social strategies was evident in qualitative data. In the following six categories which are more frequent in the data are reported:

- Recall and reinforcement of category and its contents

Example: A student says a sentence with a word which has some synonyms:

S: "Titanic was a colossal ship."

T: "Ya, a colossal ship, colossal, huge, mammoth, gigantic, massive, immense..."

- Note-taking for later check

Example:

S: "in perpetuation (...or perpetuity)" [hesitates]

T: "go on..." [writes down]

- Adjusting the tone with the mechanics of the text during reading aloud
- Emphasizing those words in a reading or listening passage which has been most difficult for them in their learning
- Strategies to maintain stimulus and interest in the job or the English language in general such as getting familiar with the L2 culture and keeping in touch with English speakers
- Organizing all English hours

Discussion

The results reported in the tables show us clear differences between teachers and non-teachers in the use of strategies. A look at Table 1 shows us the areas of difference and the significance of difference in the context of this study. The remarkable propensity for metacognitive, social and affective strategies is a distinctive characteristic for teachers. This is in line with the findings of Ehrman and Oxford (1989) who found linguists used more of affective and social strategies in comparison with learners of English. This may be the result of their experience with English in the context of its use as a foreign language, an experience which is mostly inaccessible for advanced learners. No doubt language is for communication and teachers of English have not only come to a good understanding of this role but also have been successful in devising and

improvising ways to bring this about and make it happen in a situation in which the experience will not happen automatically. This is exactly the sort of deficiency non-teachers have shown in their otherwise successful experience of learning English.

As Table 2 shows, the propensity is the converse for non-teachers who use more of cognitive, memory and compensation strategies than the categories of indirect strategies in Oxford's (1990) taxonomy. The message may be clear: that advanced learners of English are too preoccupied with their learning to pay attention to the fact that this learning can be modified greatly with the sort of strategies they are ignoring or are unaware of, that is, metacognitive, affective and social.

It is interesting to note that the sort of cognitive, memory and compensation strategies that the group of non-teachers report using can be associated with academic contexts, learning and materials. The high attention to reading, words and grammar is reminiscent of the focus in academic learning environments and the lack of attention to the use aspects of the language being learnt. More important, as it was pointed out earlier, is that the use aspects of English can only be realized if social and affective strategies are recognized and employed. Otherwise, use of language will be another type of mechanical involvement with learning which is a far cry from the reality of communication. The significantly different number of strategies used by teachers as compared to non-teachers is a sign of contrastive strategic awareness which has a role in language maintenance and improvement. The small number of strategies used by non-teachers may be a result of low strategy instruction which has been recognized in the literature.

Conclusion

This study provides some support for the idea that local English teachers use different strategies to maintain and improve their proficiency in English. This is understandably so because of these teachers' responsibility to play the role of informant and perfect model for students. Their more frequent use of social and affective strategies together with more recourse to metacognitive strategies is a sign of deeper levels of involvement with language and greater awareness of the role of these strategies to pave the way for success. This echoes Medgyes (2001) who states that only local English teachers can teach learning strategies more effectively. As he is a teacher and a learner at the same time, he has developed learning strategies that can be useful to his or her students.

The specific strategies developed as a result of local English teachers' work and life requirements are revealing in terms of our understanding of the processes involved in teacher development and training. On the other hand, they are good evidence of creativity, goal-directedness, autonomy and self efficacy of learning strategies as defined by Oxford (1990).

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