

Title of project: “Exploring Nonnative-English-Speaking Teachers’ Experiences in Teaching English at a U.S. University”

Type of grant application: Doctoral Dissertation Grant

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Detailed proposal

- Statement of research issue or problem and relationship to the Foundation’s current research priority

Recently it has become apparent that there exists a significant and increasing number of nonnative English speaking professionals whose first language is not English, assuming the role of English teachers in the U.S., and other countries. A number of nonnative English teachers are beginning to express their concerns and visions as professional teachers through journal articles in the field of TESOL. At the same time, a number of scholarly debates over the native/nonnative distinction have been generated in the field of applied linguistics. The nonnative English teachers’ concerns and the debates on the native/nonnative distinctions seem to conclude that the perceptions of identity are the central to the issues of the nonnative English teacher’s profession. However, researchers have not adequately explored the nonnative English teacher’s identity constructions in the context of a U.S. educational setting. Thus, the phenomenological case study will explore the nonnative English teacher’s identity constructions that are complex, dynamic, and multidimensional in the U.S. educational context. This study is vital to extending the existing knowledge base on the relationship between nonnative English teachers’ proficiency in English, effectiveness in teaching English as a second language, and their student achievement. The researcher strongly believes that this study will contribute to the establishment of nonnative English teachers’ professionalism, and reveal what qualities nonnative English teachers should have in terms of English language teaching in the era of global English.

- Theoretical background

The basis of this project comes from theoretical stances over the native-nonnative dichotomy, social identity, and dominant language ideologies in the United States. Regarding the native-nonnative dichotomy, a number of controversial issues have been generated in the area of applied linguistics. Among them, three are relevant for the research. First, with the globalization of English and the recognition of World Englishes, the native-nonnative dichotomy has been challenged (Kachru and Nelson 1996). Kachru and Nelson (1996) approached the issue from the sociolinguistic grounds of the historical spread of English, and delineate the use of English in a global context in terms of three concentric circles: the Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles. By introducing a variety of

the uses of English within each circle, they insist that every language variety can develop its linguistic and sociolinguistic norms that meet the needs of a particular speech community. They point out that the spread of English in those circles has created highly proficient speakers and professionals in the area of English studies and second language education. Thus, Kachru and Nelson rejected the idea of the perpetuation of the native-nonnative distinction at the national and individual level, because views through the lens of the dichotomy create a linguistic caste system and maintain a monolingual and monocultural point of reference.

Second, the native-nonnative distinction is a sociolinguistic construct that can be overcome within certain circumstances (Davies, 1991). Davies (1991) emphasizes a sociolinguistic aspect by placing the native-nonnative division within social and power relations. He posits that the native-nonnative distinction, “like all majority-minority power relations, is at bottom one of confidence and identity” (pp.166-167). He also contends that for the L2 learner “the native speaker must represent a model and goal” (p.165). However, Davies believes that the L2 learner can acquire native linguistic competence of the language even though the L2 learner is out of the L1 environment. Thus, “successful second language learners can choose native speaker membership” (p.165).

Third, the native-nonnative distinction is more or less maintained in the ELT profession (Medgyes, 1994). Medgyes (1994) sees the native-nonnative contrast as a clear, categorical distinction even though he acknowledges the problems in labeling native and nonnative speakers of English in TESOL. He sees native speakers as those “who have acquired English in comparison with non-native speakers who are still acquiring” (p.12). He states that recognizing such as difference should be an asset because those who see themselves as nonnative English teachers can work toward becoming native speakers. He does not conclude that native speakers are necessarily more effective English language teachers. For example, he insists that nonnative speakers can “show empathy, provide a good model for imitation, and teach effective language learning strategies” (p.69). However, Medgyes’ position seems to focus only on the nonnative speaker’s linguistic competence in the distinction that might influence teaching practices.

All in all, Kachru and Nelson, Davies, and Medgyes’ theoretical stances seem to acknowledge that determining the native/nonnative speaker construct is a difficult task and not clear-cut, and eventually comes to the perceptions of identity that might influence the nonnative English teacher’s profession. Thus, social identity theories should be discussed next.

In the field of second language acquisition, Peirce’s (1995) social identity theory, which places a special emphasis on the social context for the language learner to invest in, sounds persuasive. She insists that the notion of investment “attempts to capture the relationship of the language learner to the social world” and conceives the language learner as having “a complex social identity and multiple desires, and constantly organizing and reorganizing who she/he is against the social world” (pp.17-18). She proposes a concept of the language learner as “having a complex social identity that must be understood with reference to large and frequently inequitable social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction” (p.13). She claims that identity is “a site of struggle, produced in a variety of social situations, and open to change” (pp. 14-15).

Thus, her identity theory assumes that “power relation plays a crucial role in social interaction between language learners and target language speakers” (p.12).

Perice’s theoretical stance can apply to the nonnative teacher’s construction of identity. For example, by exploring the labels of native and nonnative speakers, Liu (1999) states “people (nonnative-English-speaking professionals) can have multiple social identities. These identities can change with new experiences and new social interactions, according to people’s needs and their readiness to accept how they are perceived by others.” (p.95). Given Peirce’s theoretical stance, nonnative English teachers have complex multiple social identities, constantly organizing and reorganizing who they are against the social world that might have inequitable social structures. Therefore, the last theoretical stance to be explored is the social world wherein the nonnative teacher lives. That is to say, the context of dominant language ideologies in the United States.

Wiley and Lukes (1996) introduce two popularly accepted language ideologies in the United States. One is the ideology of English monolingualism, which sees English only as a normal condition, and portrays language diversity as an alien and divisive force. The other is the ideology of Standard English, which positions speakers of different varieties of the same language within a social hierarchy, and stresses the superiority of an unaccented variety of English. Thus, nonnative English teachers may conflict with the context of those dominant ideologies in the United States, because they are multilingual and users of different varieties of English. However, they need to construct their own identities against the social context of those language ideologies.

- Research methodology

(a) Number of subjects to be involved: Four nonnative English teachers teaching freshman English composition at the University of Arizona. Approximately 80 American students and 80 ESL international students who take those nonnative English teachers’ English composition classes.

(b) The criteria for subject selection: Participants are selected for their representativeness in terms of (1) English is not first language (for nonnative English teachers); (2) nonnative English teachers teaching freshman English composition to American or ESL students at the University of Arizona; (3) nonnative English teachers who are in the position of international graduate assistants, have the same teaching advisor, and are enrolled in the MA/ESL or Ph.D. (second language acquisition and teaching) programs at the University of Arizona; (4) American or ESL students who are taking nonnative English teachers’ English composition classes; (5) willingness to accept interviews, classroom observations, and questionnaires.

(c) Methodological procedures: the researcher will use in-depth interviews, autobiographical accounts of the research participants, classroom observations, and a questionnaire to American and ESL students.

(1) Phenomenological in-depth interviews

According to Rossman and Rallis (1998), phenomenological interviewing seeks to understand the lived experience of a small group of people. Along the lines of

phenomenological studies, Seidman (1998) developed a series of three in-depth phenomenological interviews, each with a specific purpose. The first interview seeks to explore the participants' experience from the past to the present. The second interview reconstructs the details of the participants' current experience. The third interview tries to understand the meaning of the participants' experience. Following Seidman's three in-depth interviews, the researcher will attempt to conduct the following interviews.

First interview: What have been nonnative English teachers' experiences in learning and teaching of English from the past to the present?

Second interview: What are the details of nonnative English teachers' current challenges and outcomes in terms of teaching English composition in the U.S. educational setting?

Third interview. What are nonnative English teachers' goals for teaching English in the U.S. educational context? How do nonnative English teachers describe who they are in the U.S. educational context?

Thus, the first interview will seek nonnative English teachers' historical experiences in teaching and learning English from the past to the present. For the first interview, the researcher would ask nonnative English teachers some questions about their experiences in learning and teaching of English from the past to the present.

The second interview will attempt to reconstruct the details of nonnative English teachers' current challenges and outcomes in teaching English composition in the U.S. educational setting. For the second interview, the researcher will ask nonnative English teachers some questions about their current teaching experiences and challenges.

The third interview will try to understand the meaning nonnative English teachers make in terms of teaching English composition. It will also try to understand who nonnative English teachers are in the U.S. educational context. Based on the previous two interviews, the researcher will ask some questions about the meaning nonnative English teachers give to teaching English composition in the U.S. educational setting in order to understand their identity constructions.

In addition to the three in-depth interviews, the researcher will conduct periodic follow-up interviews. Through these follow-up interviews, the researcher will try to understand how nonnative English teachers construct their own identities in the U.S. educational context.

(2) Autobiographical accounts of research participants

This study will also rely on written texts, that is to say, the nonnative English teachers' autobiographical accounts that focus on their language learning and teaching experiences. Kramsch and Lam (1999) argue that the uses of written-texts in today's global and multicultural economy will change our notion of who is native and who is non-native, because non-nativeness has become one of the important criteria and innovations in the global spread of world Englishes. Nonnative English teachers' autobiographies will be of great help to understand their identity constructions as nonnative English speaking professionals.

(3) Classroom observations

Spradley (1980) presents the process of three-step observations that are descriptive, focused, and selective, moving from a broad description to gradually more narrow, selective observations. The data obtained through classroom observations are complementary to the in-depth interview data. For example, in interviews, the researcher will ask nonnative English teachers about what are the best and worst moments in

classroom activities, because those moments might influence their identity constructions. The researcher needs to observe those moments in action in the natural setting of the classroom in order to validate the interview data.

(4) The questionnaire to American and ESL students

Merriam (1988) defines questionnaires as an additional source of data that contributes to the overall analysis in case study research. She states that questionnaires can not only supply an extra data source that can be triangulated with other sources for strengthening the trustworthiness of the procedures and findings, but also offer a format for obtaining a large amount of data on specific elements related to the research.

In this study, the researcher will administer questionnaires to approximately 80 American and ESL students in order to understand what kind of impressions those students have of nonnative English teachers.

- Statement of implications of research for theory, policy, and/or practice

The phenomenological case study will be of great importance in order to provide nonnative English teachers with valuable opportunities to reflect on who they are as qualified professionals and the challenges they face in the U.S. social context. Through this case study, nonnative English teachers are given opportunities to improve their own self-images and self-perceptions in the context of dominant U.S. language ideologies, where the assumptions seem to be prevailing that “English is natural, neutral, and beneficial,” “English is best taught monolingually,” and “the ideal English teacher is a native speaker.”

Supervisors of English programs, who are in the position of employing nonnative English teachers, will also be given opportunities to reflect on the role nonnative English teachers have in the U.S. educational context. They will be given opportunities to reflect on nonnative English teachers’ linguistically diverse and rich linguistic backgrounds, which will benefit American and ESL students.

This study will contribute to native English speaking teachers because they need to cooperate with nonnative English teachers, understand who those nonnative teachers are in the U.S. context, and examine the global spread of English that might cause linguistic and cultural imperialism. Thus, this research will contribute to the construction of an active and balanced English academic community in the U.S. wherein supervisors, native and nonnative English teachers, and their students can cooperate. Furthermore, with the fact that the population of nonnative English speakers is larger than that of native English speakers in the world, this research will contribute to those who are involved in English education in both ESL and EFL contexts, and give them opportunities to consider the important role nonnative that English teachers have in the era of World Englishes. This research will contribute to language educators’ awareness of U.S. dominant language ideologies that might cause linguistic imperialism and have a negative influence on the respect for the languages of minorities.