



"If I were in charge of a language-teaching institution, I would not be interested in where the teachers were born, what their first language was, or whether they had a regional accent" - David Crystal



MAREK - TEFL EQUITY ADVOCATES & ACADEMY

Interview with David Crystal

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I am delighted to share with you an interview with David Crystal, who is one of the best-known and respected linguists. TEFL Equity Advocates had the pleasure to talk to him about native and non-native speakers, their role in teaching English, as well as the problem of discrimination of the latter group in TEFL/TESOL.

1. We are going to use the terms Native Speaker (NS) and non-Native Speaker (NNS) quite a lot in this conversation. Could you please briefly define the two terms?

A NS is someone who has learned a language (or languages) through the normal processes of child language acquisition. This means having an intuition about such things as nursery rhymes, babytalk, family slang, the regional accent and dialect of the home community (and nearby communities), language play (of a childlike kind), the rituals of child-related cultural events (such as Christmas carols, Easter, birthday chants...), and so on – as well as the interaction between these early variables in different languages in cases of bilingualism, trilingualism, etc.

A NNS lacks all this. Most come to learn a foreign language 'top down', usually beginning with the adult standard dialect and prestige accent of that language, and focusing on the formal and informal varieties felt to be most useful to their communicative needs. Note that this focus on child language acquisition means that there can never be a sharp distinction between NS and NNS. It is possible to begin learning a language at any age, obviously, so that a child beginning to learn English at age 3, 5, 7, 9... will acquire different amounts of NS intuition.

2. The CEFR defines C2 language level as native-like, which suggests it is still somewhat deficient and not quite 'native' yet. In your opinion, what does it mean to speak a language on a native level? Is it any different from being proficient or fluent in a language?

A selectivity has taken place here. The implicit comparison is between the standard variety of language learned by a NNS and the standard variety learned by a NS. Note that both processes are a result of education, for most people. Only a tiny proportion of people have had standard English as a spoken language in childhood (I would put it at around 4 or 5 percent). Most people grow up in a regional setting in which nonstandard grammar (for example) is normal (saying ain't, I were sat here, using double negatives, and so on). They learn standard English (which means, in the first instance, written English) only when they go to school, where they develop a sense of the formal rules required by that variety, and then generalize these to their spoken output. At least, that is the aim. Much of the angst encountered in the media today comes about as a result of a concern that children are not developing a fluent mastery of standard English, in both speech and

writing. When this sense of inferiority continues into adult life, it is the basis of the often-heard observation that 'foreigners speak better English than we do'.

I view native-like fluency as a NNS who has achieved a command of the phonology, orthography, grammar, lexicon, and discourse that is indistinguishable from that presented by a sociolinguistically comparable NS. This sounds straightforward enough until one starts to spell out the variables. Lexicon size, for example, is a can of worms. There are well over a million words in English. I know less than a tenth of these, and use less than a twentieth in everyday settings. So how fluent does that make me, lexically? A NNS English-using biologist far outstrips my lexical ability in the relevant specialist terminology. Assessment procedures are not brilliant at taking this kind of semantic and stylistic context into account.

And sociolinguistically: we must also compare like with like. NSs of what educational level compared with NNSs of what educational level? We know from sociolinguistics that there are many differences in practice between NSs, in terms of age, gender, class, profession, communicative medium, and so on. For the notion of 'native-like' to make sense, we need to ask always: 'what kind of NS?' Most examiners, I suspect, use themselves as the comparator, and would actually have some difficulty if they were asked to compare a NNS to a NS with a different social background to themselves.

In the end, it comes down to what one needs in order to live life as a (NS or NNS) person. Very few NNSs ever develop intuitions about local accents and dialects, for example, because they don't need to; but many NSs do not develop intuitions about a range of formal varieties that NNSs handle with unselfconscious ease.

3. Some people will still insist that NS will always speak 'better' English than NNS. They'll have a broader vocabulary range, an infallible intuition about grammar, and speak with 'correct' pronunciation. How would you respond to this and to what extent does this have a bearing on every day language teaching?

The notion of a broader vocabulary range is a myth. Most NSs have no idea of how many words they know or use, and I don't know of any tables comparing lexical range between sets of NSs or NNSs. A huge mythology is 'out there'. A favourite example of mine is the news report I saw once saying that 'the average Sun reader has a vocabulary of only 500 words!' I blogged about this. It's

nonsense, of course, but the point is relevant to the present question: NNSs who have achieved a high level of education, either formally in school and university, or through work experience, will have a larger vocabulary than many NSs. And the size of this vocabulary will be much greater than either NSs or NNSs think.

As for another myth – grammar intuitions – the existence of usage guides since the 19th century (Fowler, Gowers, Partridge, etc) shows that there are major differences of intuition about what counts as an acceptable grammatical construction in hundreds of well-recognised cases (split infinitives, beginning sentences with conjunctions, saying I will or I shall...). As of 2014, there is a new database collating all these usage guides to show how trends have changed over the decades (the HUGE – Hyper Usage Guide of English – database, compiled by a team from the University of Leiden). It shows that people row about grammatical usage all the time. There is no such thing as an 'infallible' intuition.

Similarly, with only around 2 percent of the population of England now speaking some sort of RP (an accent that has in any case changed its phonetic character markedly over the past 50 years), and with most NS teachers of English all over the world now using a range of accents – modified RP, modified British regional, American, Australian... – the notion of a single correct accent is as outdated as the Empire out of which it arose.

None of this affects the choice of a model for teaching production. If teachers are used to teaching, say, standard British English and RP, they will carry on doing so, as this is a perfectly respectable variety (even though RP has accreted some negative associations in recent years). Apart from anything else, it will sit comfortably with existing teaching materials and examining practices. But when it comes to teaching comprehension (listening or reading), then it is essential to familiarize students with the diversity that is 'out there' – starting on day 1. I see many teachers doing this now.

And the best teachers, in my view, are those who have a strong language awareness of global English dialects, stylistic variation (including online), and usage alternatives, and who know the literature on these issues. It is metalinguistic knowledge, combined with fluency, that ultimately produces the most efficient language teachers. Fluency alone is not enough. All sorts of people

are fluent, but only a tiny proportion of them are sufficiently aware of the structure of the language that they know how to teach it. What is important, of course, is that NNS teachers make sure their own metalinguistic batteries are topped up, otherwise they lose their advantage.

4. NNS outnumber NS by almost 3 to 1. Yet, the mainstream TEFL/TESOL seems to be obsessed with the 'native' model, often relegating other factors (e.g. qualifications) to a secondary role. How would you comment on this obsession? Shouldn't a greater emphasis in teaching be placed on communicativeness and intelligibility, rather than 'sounding' native?

Your ratio is well out of date. It's around 5:1 now. But that makes your point all the

stronger. Communicativeness is the key. The point is not to sound like a native speaker.

stronger, of course. Sounding native is no longer the point. I can think of only one category of person who needs to sound native – ie totally lose a NS identity – and that is: spies. Everyone else should be proud of their NS identity and not wish to lose it. The critical questions are, as you imply, semantic and pragmatic: can I get my meaning across clearly and effectively.

And to those two criteria I would add: and without losing NS identity. Just as I want to experience the glorious diversity of English accents and dialects in Britain, which enrich our linguistic and literary heritage, so I want to experience this diversity on the newly emerging global scene. I want to hear X-tinted English – fill in the 'X' by Canadian, French, Russian, Ghanaian, Brazilian... what you will. It would be a sadly denuded English linguistic world if people were being taught as if this wonderful series of varieties did not exist.

The obsession you refer to is understandable, given the long time-frame in which attitudes to language change operate. But it's already considered totally out of date by many institutions, such as the British Council, and the exam boards that I know are already becoming more tolerant of diversity. I think the antagonism will be gone within another generation. But we are in a transitional period between these old and new linguistic mindsets, so the problem you raise is unfortunately still widely encountered.

5. Most people will agree that language and culture are inextricably connected. Many recruiters who refuse to hire NNESTs, justify their policies by claiming that only a native speaker can transmit 'the target culture' to the students. Do you think this view is justified? In view of its incredible diversity, is there anything we can call 'the culture' of English?

There are lots of fallacies underlying this argument. Culture isn't a monolithic thing. It consists of tens of thousand of tiny points as well as many general issues. No NSs have experience of or understand all aspects of the culture to which they belong. Do you know everything about the music, literature, architecture, painting, folklore, religion, politics, sport... of your culture? Of course not. So there's no reason to expect NNSs to know it either.

In any case, what is 'target culture' now that English is a global language, with English-speaking communities everywhere? It's no longer just Britain or the US. We have to prepare our students to encounter English in any country they happen to visit or encounter through the media, and this means a multiplicity of targets. The English spoken in each country has its own cultural distinctiveness, reflecting the society of which it is a part. I sometimes have trouble understanding the English spoken in, say, New Zealand or India or the Czech Republic because I don't understand the cultural knowledge that the English spoken in these places expresses. I've written about this at length elsewhere, so I won't repeat myself here, other than to say that this dramatically reduces the distinction between NS and NNS. A NNS English-language learner can go to South Africa, say, and not understand those aspects of South African English that reflect local culture. But when I first went to South Africa, I couldn't understand them either. I felt like a NNS.

Familiarity, of course, breeds content – and this applies to NS and NNS alike, with sometimes the NNS being ahead of the NS. If NNSs know South Africa well (either by travelling there or online), then they will be at a linguistic advantage over NSs who do not know it or know it hardly at all. And all NNSs, by definition, know the culture of their own country better than outsiders do, so that they already have an expertise they can bring to the global English mix.

Anything that is known can be taught. The reason the culture question seems powerful is that we still don't have the teaching materials which would enable it to be taught well. How many accounts of English language and culture do you know? The Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture (LDEL) was an early attempt to do this for the lexicon. The Global course has a strongly cultural perspective. But we still lack a truly comprehensive and principled teaching syllabus for cultural issues. Culture is still introduced in a sporadic and unsystematic way – in passing, such as in Chapter 15 about the past tense, which just happens to take place at the Tower of London. The force of the culture argument will disappear when we get good pedagogical guides to English

language and culture. And this is something every teacher can contribute to. Is there a cultural guide to your country in English – a kind of local equivalent of LDEL? If not, why not do something about it?

6. In the Q&A session during the ELTForum you said that prejudice and stereotype are very slow to disappear (you can watch the video here (<http://www.tubechop.com/watch/3075793>)). How could the parties involved in English language teaching (e.g. language associations, teachers, schools, recruiters, etc.) speed up this process and promote professional equity of NESTs and NNESTs?

Well, one way is to spread examples of good practice as much as possible. I've seen many places where the obsessions and prejudices you refer to are simply things of the past, and where teachers and others are actively working on developing new materials and strategies. I can think of at least a dozen visits I've made abroad over the past ten years where the focus has been on collecting cultural material for classroom use, as I suggested above.

7. What message would you give to the teachers who have seen or suffered discrimination based on their mother tongue or country of birth?

Remain forward-looking as much as you can. Reflect on the progress that has been made over the past twenty years, and look forward to the further change that will take place in the next twenty. Remember that you are working in the middle of a transitional period between mindsets, which is always a painful process. Tell the world about your experience – easy to do these days, with online forums – because it is voices like yours which help to change climates of opinion. And don't suffer in isolation. Get in touch with one of the big teaching organisations, such as IATEFL, where these issues have been widely debated and where you'll find lots of like-minded professionals concerned to make change happen.