

# Perceptions of Native Speakers in the EFL Classroom

## *Suggestions for Research at Austrian Primary School Level*

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### *Abstract*

This paper looks at common assumptions regarding native speakers of English as EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers by drawing on international evidence as well as specifics of the Austrian primary curriculum. Its outlook suggests not only a need for a stronger focus on foreign language skills and didactics as part of teacher training programmes offered in Austria, but also an emerging need for more research into the area of primary school teachers' perceptions of their skills as both speakers and teachers of English. Proposals are made to increase the efficacy of teacher training as well as continuous professional development, in light of upcoming changes to the curricula which will affect the teaching and grading of English as it becomes compulsory at Key Stage 2.

#### *Keywords:*

English as a Foreign Language  
Primary Education  
Teacher Training

#### *Schlüsselwörter:*

Lebende Fremdsprache Englisch  
Primarstufe  
Lehrer\*innenbildung

## 1 Introduction

Despite the looming political changes on the European stage caused by the United Kingdom's exit of the European Union and the possibility of knock-on effects on the English language's status in the remaining 27 member states, English still retains its position as the unchallenged lingua franca not only in Europe, but worldwide. As Medgyes (2001) points out, eternal hegemony cannot be guaranteed, but for the moment, Fishman's (1982, p.18) comment that "the sun never sets on the English language" can still very much be upheld.

Unsurprisingly, English remains a core subject in Austrian secondary schools and, according to current governmental plans (BMBWF, 2021), primary schools are due to follow suit by 2025. English will be reclassified as a compulsory subject to replace the status quo of a subject, while offered in the vast majority of Austrian primary schools, remains ungraded. As a compulsory part of the national curriculum, grades will be awarded and the status of English further enhanced.

As a result of these changes, it is unlikely that schools' use of native speakers (NSs) will decrease in popularity anytime soon, but the question of how this will affect the teachers they work alongside remains. Research on the topic tends to focus on specialist language teachers in secondary or tertiary educational settings. However, the field of English language teaching in the primary sector with respect to NSs' involvement remains under-researched. This paper will provide more insight into a topic of increasing importance. Taking into account the new curricula about to be implemented at Austrian primary schools, it would be highly beneficial for both educators and researchers to understand the dynamics between non specialist teachers of English and NSs in the Austrian primary EFL classroom and how, in the case of the latter, this human resource is utilised. A further aspect of interest would be to explore non-specialist teachers' subjective perceptions; not only of their own foreign language competence, but also of how a native speaker's presence and input affects their own teaching and how, and to what extent, they perceive the impact of the NS's work on the classroom.

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To add another dimension to perception, the pupils' impressions of their interactions with NSs could be gathered and cross-referenced with data obtained from their class teachers.

## 2 Linguistic Imperialism

The ongoing dichotomy 'native versus non-native speaker' and its "[...]inherent ideological assumptions about the superiority of the former and the inferiority of the latter [...]" (Dewaele, 2018) as well as the challenges to this classification continue to influence EFL teachers.

Graddol (1997, p. 14) argues that "Western Europe is beginning to form a single multilingual area [...] There may be many who are monolingual in a regional language, but those who speak one of the 'big' languages will have better access to material success". Is it despite or because of this development towards English as an International Language, that when it comes to EFL teaching the perception of native speakers as the rightful 'owners' of the English language still persists? Is language becoming a commodity resulting in economic gain (Heller, 2003; 2010)? The field of linguistic imperialism, researching the reasons for and ways in which specific languages dominate internationally, suggests that a language's dominance is intrinsically linked to a structure of imperialism in culture, politics, etc., but is also due to ideological aspects, i.e., beliefs, attitudes and imagery seeking to rationalise the status quo of linguistic hierarchy (Phillipson, 1992). It appears that, as far as EFL teaching is concerned, ideology continues to support the perseverance of the idealised "native English-speaking teacher" (NEST).

The skillset of teachers in primary school settings tends to be undervalued and the "Jack of all trades" stereotype is a hard one to shake off. For the vast majority of non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), adding the unattainable ideal of the NEST to the mix puts immense pressure on the already very demanding professional circumstances primary school teachers find themselves in. It is critical to get a better understanding of how primary school teachers feel when faced with the presence of a NEST in their classroom, as well as to what extent class teachers' perceptions of NESTs match those of the pupils taught.

## 3 The Native Speaker Teacher

The concept of native and non-native speakers as separate categories is long standing, but this has been critically questioned for a while, as more and more researchers have started to challenge the assumption of superiority of the NS over the non-native speaker (NNS) (Dewaele, 2018; Cook, 2012; Llurda, 2009). While the fixed dichotomy was initially not only accepted, but heavily exploited in research on second language acquisition, with studies by Long (1983) and Pica (1988) focusing on the interaction between speakers of both groups, other researchers, such as Paikeday (1985), Rampton (1990), or Davies (1991) started to critically question whether to continue with the same classification (Llurda, 2009). Mahboob (2004, p. 22) also states that "the blind acceptance of the native speaker norm in English language teaching" is starting to fade.

Research by Braine (1999) and Medgyes (1994) into the unique skills and contributions of NNESTs within the EFL classroom is a welcome development in recognising that very few NESTs can match this performance, thereby enhancing the NNESTs status. Calls for an end to the dichotomy remain, as the classification itself suggests that 'native' is something positive, while the prefix 'non' in 'non-native' holds negative connotations (Matsuda, 2003).

Medgyes (1994) draws attention to the "genetic inferiority complex affecting NNESTs" and later research also indicates that NNESTs themselves prefer NS models as well as NS teachers (Llurda and Huguet, 2003; Sifakis and Sougari, 2005; Jenkins, 2007). Llurda (2009, p. 10) argues that it is crucial "[...] for NNESTs to adopt the formulation of English as an International Language (EIL) or English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in order to develop a positive self-image and feel rightfully entitled to teach a language that is not their mother tongue". Seidlhofer's (2011, p. 7) definition of ELF as "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option [...]" demonstrates that, from this perspective, the privilege of the NS is removed; the NS is merely another user of ELF, not a superior one. It has also been argued that NNESTs are in fact the ones who enjoy privilege, since they have the ability to switch between target language and their L1 and consequently have a much better understanding of the demands of the learning situation (Kramsch, 1997). Moreover, several researchers stress the added value of NNESTs as

teachers who can empathise with the needs and experiences of their language learning students (Medgyes, 1994; Tang, 1997; Seidlhofer, 1999).

At this point it should be noted that the classification of NS or NEST can be problematic, as this suggests a homogenous group rather than considering that a distinction needs to be made according to previous training, pedagogical aptitude and, ideally, knowledge of the local language. Ellis's research (2002; 2006) highlights the question of proficiency in a language other than English whereby monolingual NSs are at a distinct disadvantage as teachers since their own language learning is not suitably developed in order to equip them with sufficient experience of the foreign language acquisition process.

However, it must be stated that the considerations mentioned above all fall within the academic field of applied linguistics, but that outside the world of academia, both NSs and NESTs continue to remain in the same prestigious position as far as non-linguists are concerned. The idea that the NS is the ideal teacher, even without formal training, while the NNEST, after years of receiving education in didactics, remains an imperfect user of the language and is therefore an inferior educator in the EFL classroom, still enjoys widespread acceptance (Llurda, 2009).

## 4 The Austrian Primary School EFL Classroom

Even though the current curriculum allows Austrian primary schools to choose from various modern foreign languages, the privileged position of English is clearly reflected in the numbers, with an impressive 99.7% of pupils learning English (Eurostat, 2015). Curriculum guidelines are for pupils to start learning a foreign language as of their first year of primary school, with an emphasis on oral production (BMBWF, 2012), which, in the classroom, is often aided using rhymes, songs, or mini dialogues. Recommendations for the inclusion of written language are to wait until the third and fourth year of primary school, with reading activities preceding writing tasks, which form the smallest part of the foreign language curriculum (BMBWF, 2012).

Generally, NNESTs tend to favour more secure forms of classwork, and consequently have a strong preference for standard course books, which provide security rather than opening situations that are potentially unpredictable linguistically (Reves and Medgyes, 1994; Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 1999). Moreover, there is no special emphasis on foreign language learning as far as mainstream primary schools in Austria are concerned. The minimum teaching time per week averaging one hour and a dominance of traditional foreign language learning techniques, plus usage of a textbook by 90% of Austrian primary school teachers (Buchholz, 2007; Fuchs, 2006), echoing the findings above. This is despite Austria's framework curriculum, which does allow for a certain amount of flexibility. Therefore, a better understanding of teachers' perceptions of their own English language skills as well as how NSs are placed in the classroom would be beneficial. By exploring primary school teachers' attitudes and beliefs as well as perceived advantages and disadvantages of having access to a NS, insights into areas for improvement of the status quo can be gained.

When looking at the history of foreign language teaching at primary school level, Austria can proudly claim to have been one of the first European countries to introduce such measures. Interestingly, when a pilot programme for modern foreign language teaching for Key Stage 2 was introduced in 1983, it was specialist language teachers who delivered these lessons in primary schools (Buchholz, 2007). However, the current situation does not allow class teachers at primary school level the luxury of leaving the teaching of the foreign language to subject specialists, even though the new, soon to be released curriculum, puts a stronger focus on accountability with the change to compulsory, i.e., graded subject at Key Stage 2 (BMBWF, 2021). When considering the research of Böhler-Wüstner (2004) which showed that at Key Stage 2, more foreign language lessons are passed over in favour of other subjects rather than being taught according to the timetable, one possible assumption is that primary level educators feel overwhelmed. Moreover, since the 1980s, Austria is now almost bottom of the pile compared to the rest of Europe when it comes to contact time in early foreign language education (Buchholz, 2006). It remains to be seen whether the upcoming changes to the curriculum will result in an increase in contact time.

A closer look at the education of Austrian primary school teachers confirms that foreign language teaching, in most cases, English, plays a minimal role. Up until 2014, six-semester (180 ECTS points) primary school teacher training programmes were offered at Austrian University Colleges, with only between six and eight ECTS points devoted to foreign language teaching. The switch to eight-semester courses (240 ECTS points) in the autumn semester 2015, i. e., the new curriculum for teacher training, did not see an increase in content focusing on didactics of foreign language teaching (Gruber, 2017). Considering the small percentage of

specialised foreign language didactics input throughout their training, it does not come as a surprise that many teachers find it challenging to fulfil the foreign language curriculum's demands. Unfortunately, it is due to these shortcomings, perceived or actual, that the role of the NS is often used as an insurance policy. While the presence of a NS can be beneficial, it is not a cure-all. In effect, NS support can also be counterproductive if the interplay between class teacher and NS is poorly orchestrated (Birkenbihl, 2001; Hibler, 2010;) or if the NS does not possess competence in the pupils' first language or didactics (Medgyes, 2001).

When it comes to pupils' attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs, no relevant data specific to the Austrian primary classroom can be found, however, Cook's (2000, p. 331) study based on an international survey of secondary school age pupils found that "The NS teacher was preferred by 18% of Belgian 15-year-olds, 44% of English children, and 45% of Polish children. Looked at in reverse, 47% of Belgian, 32% of English, and 25% of Polish children preferred non-natives, the rest having no preference".

Furthermore, Cook (2000) states that nowhere in his data a clear preference for NESTs can be found and that reasons for pupils' preferences of certain teachers go beyond the NNEST or NEST category. It would be of interest to compare his findings to data gathered in the Austrian primary EFL classroom, as studies of this type tend to focus on secondary or post-secondary students, with primary school age children's attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs remaining under-researched.

## 5 Summary and Outlook

To remove existing bias and illustrate to primary school pupils and teachers alike that effective teaching of a foreign language is not dependent on the educators' first language, it is crucial to focus on teachers' needs and worries in their initial training as well as offers of continuous professional development. Focused research into the following areas would aid the development and implementation of needs-adequate training programmes:

- How to support and develop primary school educators' foreign language competence and self-esteem
- Specifics of use of NSs at primary school level across all nine Austrian federal states (country-wide status report)
- Dynamics between non specialist teachers of English and NSs in the classroom
- Primary school teachers' subjective perceptions of their foreign language competence, thus pinpointing where support is needed
- Primary school pupils' subjective perceptions of foreign language teaching received by their class teachers and NSs respectively, ideally cross-referenced with data gathered regarding the point above

Successful English lessons in primary school and, as a direct result, pupils' smooth transition to the foreign language demands at secondary school, will require competent educators, confident to deliver the subject. While a competence-based curriculum for pupils is a step in the right direction, the curricula for initial and in-service teacher training should follow the same path, thus equipping a new generation of primary level educators with the skills needed to impart ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) rather than EFL (English as a Foreign Language).

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