

DEBUNKING THE MYTHS OF NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKER TEACHERS: AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR MASAKI ODA

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Masaki Oda is a Professor of Applied Linguistics at Tamagawa University in Tokyo, Japan, specializing in Sociopolitical Aspects of Language Use. Prof. Oda got his PhD program from Georgetown University, where he also taught Japanese for several years. He returned to Japan in 1990 and began teaching EFL and training EFL teachers at Tamagawa University. He was the 2003 – 2004 Chair of the NNEST Caucus and is now the Director of Center for English as a Lingua Franca (CELF) at Tamagawa University and the AsiaTEFL Vice President. This interview highlights Professor Oda's experiences and opinions regarding NEST (Native English Speaker Teacher) and NNEST (Non-Native English Speaker Teacher). He attempts to raise awareness among the professionals that there should be no divide between NEST and NNEST in the ELT profession.

1. Prof. Masaki, could you start by telling us a little bit about your background? What attracted you to the field of English Language Teaching (ELT)?

I was born and raised in Japan. I had been to Japanese schools until I went to the US for my MA in TESL/FL at St. Michael's College in 1984. To

tell the truth, I do not have any good memory of my English lessons at schools. However, I have always enjoyed hearing about foreign countries from my father who was a professional painter and had travelled all over the world. In addition, I was interested in operating an amateur radio when I was in the upper secondary school. I was not interested in languages in particular, but English was the language to enable me to know more about foreign countries. It was later in my undergraduate years when I began interested in teaching English to 'invite' more people to something that I enjoyed doing.

2. You were the 2003-2004 Chair of the Non-native English Speaker Teacher (NNEST) Caucus, one of the former leaders of the NNEST Caucus. Could you share any vivid memories from your experience as the 2003-2004 Chair of the NNEST Caucus?

I still believe that the foundation of NNEST Caucus was a major footstep in the ELT profession. It certainly helped the people recognize that being a non-native speaker of English was not necessarily a disadvantage for us to teach English. As we had had strong leaders such as George Braine, Jun Liu and Paul Kei Matsuda before me, I only had to follow their footsteps as far as the administration was concerned. The difficulty was, however, the fact that TESOL was not really an 'international' but a North American organization. Even though I worked hard to fulfill my duty as the chair, some people criticized me for not attending TESOL's international conferences. So many US based members did not realize how difficult (both schedule and costs) it was for us to attend a conference held in North America during the term-time. I would also like to say that I was not satisfied with the name 'NNEST' Caucus because it created a NES-NNES dichotomy which still exists in the ELT profession. My standpoint has been that there should not be any distinction between NES and NNES in the ELT profession. These experiences have eventually led to my involvement in AsiaTEFL as well as the establishment of CELT at Tamagawa University which I will talk about later.

3. As a former leader of the NNEST Caucus, what improvements have you witnessed in the past 10 years? Is there anything more you would like to see?

Yes, the NNEST Caucus became an Interest Section. However, the entire profession should not be satisfied with it and stop making progress. I strongly believe that it is our long term goal to promote no distinction between NEST and NNEST in the ELT profession.

4. In 2014, as the Director of Center for English as a Lingua Franca (CELFL) at Tamagawa University in Tokyo, Japan, you launched ELF (English as a lingua franca) program which is a campus wide program designed for Tamagawa University students (<http://www.tamagawa.ac.jp/celf/about/>). The ELF courses were first taught by instructors with nine different first languages coming from eleven different countries and offered to 1,000 first and second year students. What inspired you and your colleagues at the CELFL to issue such policy?

It was, and it is a challenging task. However, I was very fortunate that the President as well as the Executive Directors of Tamagawa University strongly supported my idea and gave me a green light when I had been appointed as the chair of the planning committee for reforming our university-wide English language program. As an EFL teacher, teacher trainer and applied linguist, my two decades of attempts to remove NEST-NNEST dichotomy from the ELT profession had not been successful as the dichotomy had already rooted deeply in the profession. What I decided to was, therefore, to build up an entirely new 'core' team including both so-called NESTs and NNESTs. It was very important to get rid of many of my colleagues' misbeliefs as though I had been Anti-NEST. With the help of the team, we decided our hiring criteria for instructors. In addition to the university's general requirements including experiences in teaching and research, our teachers are required to possess 1) an MA in ELT/TESOL/Applied Linguistics, 2) Experience in learning at least one foreign language to advanced level. In addition, we decided to remind the applicants that we would NOT consider whether an applicant is a native speaker or not. In the beginning, we received inquiries from NNESTs if they were really able to apply. A few months later, we began receiving applications from highly qualified professionals who were neither Japanese nationals nor NESTs. I believe that it was a very important moment in Japan as many of them had not even had a chance to apply for

English language teaching positions. As a result, we were able to hire teachers with 11 different first languages and the number of first languages will go up to 18 in 2016. We had originally expected some negative reactions from the students as they had little exposure to some varieties of English. However, the students have appreciated the diversity very much according to the results of the course evaluation. In contrast, it was faculty members (particularly English teachers outside CELF) as well as parents who are still struggling to accept the diversity of the teachers and that of English used by them.

5. You are also one of the current AsiaTEFL Vice President. So far have you witnessed more equality between NESTs and NNESTs in EFL countries in Asia such as in Japan or Indonesia? What could or should AsiaTEFL and other professional ELT organizations do to address the voices of English teachers? What could or should they do to empower both the NESTs and NNESTs and to diminish the divide between the two groups?

AsiaTEFL is a good example of where English is used as a lingua franca. While there are a few executive council members whose first language is English, the majority of officers as well as general members have acquired English as a second or a foreign language. However, I have rarely felt an existence of NES-NNES dichotomy in the organization. This is a big difference from my experience with TESOL in which so-called native speakers (particularly from North America) were always in the center of ELT by default, and most of us who are NESs from outside North America were treated as peripheral. Unfortunately, this is also the case in the ELT profession in most of the Asian countries. What professional ELT organizations can contribute is to raise awareness among the professionals in the region that NES – NNES dichotomy is no longer necessary. One's background in training and experience in language teaching are more important than being a native speaker of English. This is the direction that AsiaTEFL, in-cooperation with national organizations such as TEFLIN or JACET should follow.

6. What advice would you give to teachers who are interested on NEST and NNEST issues? What other areas of these issues do you think need further research?

If I express in a single word, it is 'Reflection'. We all have to reflect what is going on. It is very important for us to share information with teachers and researchers in the regions with similar situations, e.g., Indonesia and Japan, in which English is taught as a foreign language. In order to develop a background for the approach, I would recommend you to read Adrian Holliday's (2005) *The Struggle to Teach English as an International Language*, Barbara Seidlhofer's (2011), *Understanding English as a Lingua Franca*, both of which are published by Oxford University Press, before reading on specific cases such as those in Stephanie Ann Houghton and Damian Rivers, eds. (2013) *Native-Speakerism in Japan*, or Aya Matsuda, ed. (2012) *Principles and Practices of Teaching English as an International Language*, both of which are published by Multilingual Matters.

7. You have presented and attended some conferences in Indonesia including the 60th TEFLIN International Conference in Jakarta, the 61st TEFLIN Conference in Solo and the 62nd TEFLIN Conference in Denpasar. What inspired you to attend TEFLIN conferences?

A few years ago, I joined a wonderful *Facebook* group *Teacher Voices* moderated by Dr. Willy Renandya (<http://www.facebook.com/groups/teachervoices/>). The group has been an excellent source for my own development as a teacher and a researcher. I particularly enjoy exchanging information with many Indonesian colleagues, and often realize that some issues of ELT we are suffering from are not unique to Japan, and thus we can work together a lot. I always enjoy meeting my *Teacher Voices* friends in Indonesia in person at TEFLIN conferences. I also have two personal reasons that I feel attached to Indonesia. In my secondary school days, I used to operate amateur radio. I made many friends in different parts of Indonesia and it was my routine at that time that I put a pin on the map so that I knew the location of the people I talked to on the radio. In addition, I shared a house with someone from Surabaya and Selangor, Malaysia when I first went to the U.S. for my MA. This is why I always miss Indonesia and especially its *sambal* very much.

8. Professionally, I am impressed by your different roles: professor, director, vice president, writer, and reviewer. Have you ever thought or wished you would have gone this far? What inspires and motivates you in your career?

I often feel that I need 50 to 100 hours a day. But I strongly believe that everything is related, and thus we all need to learn how to maximize the benefits from unique experiences each person has to what we do. No matter which of the above roles I play at a particular time, I try to build myself as a language teaching professional who can contribute to the field as much as I can.

9. Thank you for this inspiring interview. Hope to see you next year in Surabaya for the 63rd TEFLIN Conference.

Yes. I am looking forward to attending another TEFLIN conference and share ideas with my Indonesian colleagues.