Towards a pedagogy of empowerment: The case of 'impostor syndrome' among pre-service non-native speaker teachers in TESOL

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Introduction

The phenomenon of the Non-Native Speaker Teacher (NNST) has received considerable attention in literature in recent years, and research in this area has been explicitly identified as necessary for NNST preparation and development (Bailey 2001). However, given Canagarajah's (1999) estimate that claims 80% of English language teachers are of non-native background, it could be argued that there is still paucity of literature in areas such as language teachers' selfperceptions and issues related to identity. According to Inbar-Lourie (2005: 269), language teachers are clearly aware of the crucial significance of native/non-native labelling to their professional status, and the impact of such labelling in a time when 'the market values the native speaker... and, in our post-industrial, neoliberal world who will dare challenge what the market dictates?' (Inbar-Lourie 2005: 293).

While early discussions in literature reflected a 'deficit model' focusing on non-native teachers' shortcomings, more recent evidence suggests that NNSTs possess many advantages, such as a more thorough knowledge of grammar, empathy for the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learner having been one themselves, being a bilingual resource in the classroom, and understanding the local curricula and contextual demands, to name a few. Yet despite this, both anecdotal evidence and documented self-perceived prejudice (Amin 1997; Canagarajah 1999; Kamhi-Stein, Lee and Lee 1999; Thomas 1999; Medgyes 1994) suggest that non-native teachers often feel like 'impostors', 'in a world that still values native speakers as the norm providers and the natural choice in language teacher selection' (Llurda 2005: 2).

The psychological construct of impostorhood is a relatively under-researched phenomenon, yet a prevalent feeling among many non-native teachers of English. Impostorhood is characterized by feelings of inadequacy, personal inauthenticity or fraudulence, self-doubt, low self-efficacy beliefs, and sometimes generalized anxiety (Yates and Chandler 1998). The 'impostor syndrome' was first brought to the attention of educators through the work of the feminist psychotherapist, Dr

Pauline Clance (Clance and Imes 1978; Clance 1990; Clance 'Impostorhood' describes a sense of personal inauthenticity in individuals who evidence achievement. In some contexts, it has been defined as an 'internal experience of intellectual phoniness' and a phenomenon of 'feeling like a fraud' (Clance and Imes 1978: 241). Clance noted this trait was often found in high achieving women, but later work revealed it is found in both male and female samples. Studies on impostor syndrome are relatively scarce, though a number are reported in contexts other than language teacher education, such as among higher degree research students in MA and PhD programmes (e.g. Yates and Chandler 1998), and nursing (e.g. Heinrich 1997).

The paper argues that in the EFL teaching context a special kind of impostorhood exists the 'NNST Impostorhood', where the feelings of inauthenticity or fraudulence are not specifically related to high achievement (although they may well be), but are related to feelings of inadequacy in the role of a language teacher or 'language expert' of one's non-native tongue. Tang (1997) observed in her study that many NNSTs feel inadequate in their work. Although there appears to be strong anecdotal evidence which attests to the existence of the impostor syndrome among pre-service TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) trainees of non-native English language background, there is less empirical evidence which could provide a foundation of its evidencing a need for exploratory studies in this

With the rapid spread of English around the globe, more and more prospective teachers of a non-native tongue are 'stepping into the shoes' of someone often perceived by them to be more superior for the task – a native speaker. The idealized native speaker model appears to be such a powerful dominant force that Llurda (forthcoming) likened it to the 'Stockholm Syndrome' after the psychiatrist, Nils Bejerot, who coined the term to describe a victim's psychological identification with his or her captor

 a form of identification with a perceived more powerful figure as a strategy for survival in difficult circumstances.

Undoubtedly, a number of salient factors play an important role in the way non-native teachers' perceptions of self and construction of new teacher identity are formed. Norton (2000: 5) defines identity as 'how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future'. Although the overall semiotic structure of self is said to be almost identical for all humans. identities are more contextually determined and are a result of various cultural interpretations of race, gender, social class, religion, and notions of membership (van Lier 2004). In this view, social, institutional and political considerations and forces operate at the level of identity, and inequalities such as those related to being a non-native teacher of English are therefore environmentally produced rather than inherited. This critical perspective foregrounds the need explore to environmentally influenced and self-constructed discourses among the disempowered within the teaching profession.

Teachers' personal discourses regarding self and language teacher identity may include beliefs about their own competence (self-efficacy beliefs), level of language proficiency, career opportunities, past teaching experiences, and perceptions of self as 'language expert', to name a few. Furthermore, during their quest for constructing their identity as language teachers, NNSTs may encounter conflicting views related to language standards, 'correct' pronunciation, role modelling and so on, which may likely shape their perceptions of self and lead to negative self-evaluation. Since perceptions of 'self as language expert' and selfefficacy beliefs may develop during the course of teacher training (although some may have been shaped beforehand), they could arguably be either cemented or challenged in the process of preservice teacher education, both in a university classroom setting as well as during their practicum experience. This would suggest that teacher education courses have an important role to play

In terms of literature, seminal works on the subject of NNSTs in English language education disseminated in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Medgyes 1983, 1992, 1994; Reves & Medgyes 1994; Braine 1999) and more recently (Llurda 2005; Kamhi-Stein 2007) have brought together experiential facts and theoretical principles in a rigorous and clear manner, prompting more recent interest in

this area. These studies are acknowledged here as part of the initial efforts to assert the status of NNSTs of English, both pre-service and inservice, around the world. Moussu and Llurda (2008) have recently compiled, classified and examined research conducted in the last two decades on this topic, placing a special emphasis on World Englishes concerns, methods of investigation, and areas in need of further attention.

However, until now very few studies have examined NNSTs' self perceptions, even though their self ascribed and non-native identities have meaningful consequences for their personal as well as classroom behaviour (Norton 2000). Applying a socio-psychological framework, Inbar-Lourie (2005) studied the gap between self and perceived native speaker identities of EFL teachers. She reviewed variables that have been noted to affect language teachers' perceived native and non-native identities such as 'pronunciation, familiarity with the target language and its culture, self-efficacy in teaching the various subject matter components and perceptions as to who qualifies as a native speaker of the language' (Inbar-Lourie 2005: 269). Using a self-report questionnaire with open-ended questions in a sample of 102 mostly female EFL teachers in Israel, Inbar-Lourie asked them to ascribe themselves as NS (Native Speaker) or NNS of English. They were also questioned about how others (NS, NNS, and their students) perceived them. The findings confirm the existence of a gap between self and perceived identities, a gap that is assumed by EFL teachers as belonging to the multi-identity reality in which they function.

In Brazil, Rajagopalan (2005) explored in detail the underlying causes of the so-called 'native speaker myth' in English language teaching and the resulting marginalization of the NNS teacher which, he argues, is purely ideological. He presents quantitative and qualitative data from questionnaire completed by 450 EFL teachers in an attempt to help overcome NNSTs' 'often unconfessed complex of inferiority' (284), which he believes is 'much more wide spread than might seem at first glimpse' (293). Some of the findings of the quantitative questionnaire data were that: 52% felt handicapped when it came to career advancement; 40% felt doomed to be chasing an impossible ideal; and 66% felt they were treated as second class citizens in their workplace. From the qualitative part of the study, the researcher found that NNSTs frequently complained about their speaking anxiety in the presence of 'native speakers'. Rajagopalan set out to challenge some of the study respondents' pre-set assumptions resulting in lack of self-confidence by exposing them to texts problematizing EFL practices worldwide, as well as discussions. While the intervention study was in its infancy at the time of its publication, an early highly encouraging result was the perception gained that these teachers did know at the bottom of their hearts that there was a genuine problem to be addressed in the wider context of the EFL teaching profession that was ideologically imbued and intertwined with various issues related to the global status of English.

In another study, Tang (1997) reports on a survey of 47 NNSTs in Hong Kong, examining perceptions of their own proficiency and competency, as compared with those of NSTs. Her subjects felt that NSTs were superior to NNSTs in areas of fluency such as speaking (100%), pronunciation (92%), and listening (87%). Tang found that NNS teachers 'were felt to be associated with accuracy rather than fluency' (578). The results of this study clearly show that NNSTs perceive their NST counterparts as far superior in oral and aural proficiency.

Finally, in a survey conducted by Medgyes (1994), 325 teachers from 11 countries, 86% of whom were NNSs, completed self-report questionnaires about their perceived behaviour as English language teachers. Results showed that the NNSTs 'viewed themselves as poorer listeners, speakers, readers, and writers' (Medgyes 1994: 33) their native English-speaking teacher counterparts. These NNSTs identified speaking and fluency, pronunciation and listening as most problematic after vocabulary and idiomatic and appropriate use of English. Areas of accuracy, such as grammar and writing skills, were mentioned far less frequently, and reading skills and cultural knowledge were not even mentioned by the NNSTs surveyed.

Study aims and limitations

The aim of the current study was to investigate the self-constructed notions of identity in relation to current and projected 'self' as a NNST of English, using various data elicitation methods. The study also aimed to provide participants with opportunities for reflection, as well as exposure to 'Near-Peer Role Models' with the intention to minimize, if not eliminate, the feelings of inadequacy among other symptoms of the impostor syndrome. Therefore, the study could be termed interventionist and experimental, in line with Moussu and Llurda's (2008) recent call for such studies.

The limitations of this research go beyond its situational and contextual constraints, given the affective nature of the latent variables under study, namely self-efficacy beliefs and feelings associated with impostorhood. In addition, the data reported in this study derive from a small convenience sample, thus findings should not be generalized to other populations. Nonetheless, comparative research data derived from various participant samples across various contexts suggest feasibility of pursuing this line of exploratory research in other contexts.

Methodology

Participants

Eleven non-native teacher trainees of TESOL participated in the study, 7 female and 4 male, aged between 19–32 years. They came from China (3), Korea (2), Japan (2), Thailand (1), South America (1), Turkey (1), and Greece (1). At the time of data collection, participants were undertaking initial teacher training in TESOL at postgraduate level at an Australian university, although almost half of the respondents had had some previous language teaching experience.

Data collection methods and analyses

A predominantly qualitative approach was taken in this study, which utilizes a number of varied data collection methods. McCracken (1988) points out that qualitative research is 'complexity-catching', allowing for probing, detailing and clarifying issues. This type of methodology seems therefore appropriate for uncovering the existence of such complex latent variables as the ones under investigation in this study.

In terms of participant selection, it is important to note that a convenience sample was selected based on the results of administering a selfdeveloped instrument called 'NNST Impostor Scale' (see appendix) to a wider cohort of NNS TESOL trainees. Thus, out of 32 participants surveyed, 13 had responded positively to the scale (i.e. showed some degree of impostorhood, scoring in the mid-to-high range), and 11 agreed to take part in the voluntary quasi-experimental, intervention study that lasted one semester. At the first stage, participants took part in 40 minute indepth interviews, which were recorded, then transcribed verbatim and coded for recurring themes. Next, to triangulate the interview data, participants were asked to design a collage in their own time, using pictures and words from various published media sources such as brochures and



magazines, or personal drawings. They were later asked to bring their collage for a discursive interpretation session of its representational meanings (second interview). Typically, literature on reasoning with external representations considers either subjects interpreting presented representations, or subjects constructing their own representations (e.g. Wilkin 1997; Katz and Anzai 1991), the latter being the case in this study. Visual representations are believed to provide useful indepth insights into the thoughts and feelings of a person. Again, data from this session was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Finally, a focus group was conducted to ascertain whether any changes in teacher perceptions had taken place over the period of one semester.

Apart from opportunities for self reflection during their collage design, participants were also exposed to two lecture visits by successful NNSTs of TESOL. These individuals provided insights into their own early feelings and experiences as NNSTs, and demonstrated how success for NNSTs in this profession is possible. Being close peers, they served as role models for the trainees. Near-Peer Role Modeling (Murphey 2001) has been used as a successful framework in instigating belief and attitude change based on the 'peer communicator theory' in social psychology. Near Peers are people who might be near to us in several ways: age, ethnicity, gender, interests, past or present experiences, and also in proximity and in frequency of social contact. According to sociopsychological theory, they are deemed to be more believable and influential in their message than people who are not 'near'.

Discussion of findings

First, it needs to be acknowledged that given editorial constraints, only a snapshot of the whole data can be described in this paper. The whole data set is very rich and wide in scope, and it would not be possible to report on all of it. Selectivity of data is inevitable in reporting qualitative studies involving many participants and numerous data gathering instruments and measures. As with any study, findings may not be representative of other populations and ought to be interpreted with caution.

Self-rating Scale

All selected participants completed 'The NNST Impostor Scale' (see appendix). The findings from the survey revealed that a slight minority of respondents believed that their achievements can be attributed purely to luck rather than hard work.

The majority agreed that people see them as more competent than they really are, and stated that more often than not, they have been surprised by their success on a project which they had expected to fail on. In terms of the teaching context, the vast majority of respondents felt that their accent made it hard for people to understand them, and all respondents reported feeling inferior compared to NSTs. More than half the respondents felt that they do not belong in front of the classroom, and this may be either a result of lack of teaching experience or feelings of inadequacy due to being NNS (though subsequent interview data showed that the latter cause dominated). There were mixed results as to the congruence of self representation in the public and private domains. The vast majority also reported being unsure whether they would make good language teachers. Overall, the findings of the scale confirm that NNSTs (particularly females) felt inferior in their role as language teachers and had deep concerns over their ability to teach English and to fit into the teaching role.

First Interview data

The purpose of individual interviews was to gain insight into NNSTs' self perceptions and to triangulate the data reported in the self-rating NNST Impostor Scale. There were a number of recurring themes in the interview data. One of these related to the idealized native speaker model. Many local teachers felt that students expected to have a NST in the classroom, and that being nonnative disadvantaged them in terms of employment.

Interestingly, while teachers in this study were concerned that students expected a native speaker teacher, Cook's (2005) study shows that students are not necessarily as impressed by native speaker teachers as one might suppose. Cook conducted a survey of adults and children aged on average 14, from six different countries. Respondents were asked to show agreement or disagreement to a statement, among others, 'Native speakers make the best language teachers'. The approval rating for native teachers ranged from 72% for children in England down to 33% for children in Belgium, and from 82% for adults in England to 51% for adults in Taiwan. While this indeed confirms a preference for native speakers, it is not an overwhelming preference with the exception of England. Cook comments that, given that students are reflecting the societies in which they dwell and the beliefs of their teachers and parents, it is surprising that they are overall lukewarm about native speaker teachers.

In terms of being disadvantaged employment as a NNST, Rajagopalan (2005: 286) claims that 'the whole idea of native speakerhood has over the years only served as a dreadful nightmare...', and that it is not uncommon to find NNSTs who have been literally brainwashed into believing that their highest goal should be to be so proficient in the language as to be welcomed into the community of native speakers as 'regular' members. The author blames the current state of affairs on the imperialist dimension of the EFL enterprise which relegates the NNT to a condition of 'second class citizenship', and points out that being 'near native', or what Medgyes (1994) labels 'pseudo-native', meant that one was being a rather clever impostor who was bound to be caught out in due course - which is precisely the concern voiced by many teachers in this study.

Another issue raised in the interviews related to teachers' concerns over their accent. Yuko (pseudonyms used), a young Japanese female teacher, put it like this:

Yuko: Like, especially about speaking. I

have strong Japanese accent and, umm... like pronunciation, yes... I still have worries about that. Students sometimes have trouble

understanding me.

Interviewer: Do they tell you that?

Yuko: Yes, regularly!

Interviewer: And how do you feel when they do

that?

Yuko: Embarrassed [shy laughter].

Kamhi-Stein (2007) points out 'accentreduction discourses' are disempowering to NNS teachers who may have one of many stigmatized accents that students are being encouraged to unlearn in order to succeed. Hence, good pedagogy and social justice demand that TESOL programs rethink this emphasis on native speaker accents, since it is almost impossible for adults to eliminate their native accent. In Yuko's case however, it is important that her pronunciation is comprehensible, rather than 'native-like' - the emphasis here being on intelligibility. Where intelligibility is an issue - as it is in this case - a number of researchers (e.g. Pasternak and Bailey 2007; Lee 2007) have suggested that NNSTs might benefit from further language training in their teacher-training courses.

Collage design - second interview data

Among the most interesting and insightful data gathered were the collages teachers had designed and created using newspaper and magazine clippings. They had been asked to find words, phrases, and pictures which represented how they are feeling about themselves as language teachers now, and about their future career prospects. While discussing their collages, teachers used metaphors to describe the pictures they had placed in their collages. Metaphorical conceptualizations provide a useful symbolic representational framework for analysing 'inner reality'. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), a metaphor is a mental construction that helps us to structure our experience and to develop our imagination and reasoning. Munby (1986: 206) studied teachers' use of metaphors in their descriptions of their work, and concluded that 'given the powerful link between metaphor and construction of reality', the use of metaphors proves to be a promising alternative in exploring teachers' thinking. In another study, metaphors such as 'teaching as parenting'; 'teacher as butterfly' and 'teacher as chameleon' are used to explore pre-service teachers' personal teaching experience (Bullough 1991).

During the collage discussion session, some of the conceptual metaphors used to describe teachers' experiences included: 'winding road' which reflected the uncertain turns one might take in one's teaching career; 'the journey' and 'standing at the cross-roads' for a teacher who was uncertain whether she would make a good NNST. Clippings of words and phrases which reflected a NNST identity included: 'odd one out', 'not the expert', and 'language problems'. When discussing these, teachers mentioned the - all too often expressed concerns over their status as NNS of English and their trepidations about how this might be perceived by their future students and employers. Words that reflected negative affect included: 'lonely', 'stressed', 'escape', 'mocked', 'overwhelming', and 'fake'. With reference to the last word, it is important to note that at no time during this intervention study were words such as: fake, impostor, phony, etc., used by the researcher so as not to be 'leading' (the title of the survey instrument "NNST Impostor Scale" had also been left out). However, on a positive note, teachers also expressed hope and an optimistic outlook in many cases. Words and phrases which reflected this included: 'don't give up', 'keep trying', 'dream', 'possibility', 'destiny', and 'ready'. From these individual discussion sessions, it became apparent that although teachers had by and large negatively

evaluated themselves, and at times felt overwhelmed by what they were undertaking in their career, they also saw a possibility of success.

Near-peer role modelling (NPRM)

During the semester, teacher trainees were exposed to various models and 'empowering discourses' in their lectures on issues related to NNSTs - both from their NNS lecturer, and two NNSTs who came to give talks on two separate occasions. They had been informed of the emerging global changes to the status of the NNST and of the fact that NNSTs currently outnumber NSTs in the world - a fact which the trainee teachers had not known and were very pleasantly surprised to learn about. Furthermore, the two visiting teachers who came to give personal testimonials on their own professional journey in the field of TESOL seemed to have a very positive effect on the listeners. The speakers had engaged the trainees in fruitful discussions, and found that they were able to relate to each others' feelings and experiences well. One male teacher from China had commented that he now not only believed he could be a good model of a successful language learner for his students back in China, but also had the desire to be a successful model for other NNSTs in his homeland.

Focus group data

At the end of the semester-long intervention, all participants had come together for a focus group discussion on their reflections during the study and to report on what they had gained from it personally. Reflection is crucial to teacher development and an effective tool to teacher empowerment (Bailey, Curtis and Nunan 2001). Most teachers commented how useful they found the information and that they felt no longer alone in their struggle for recognition, yet they were still realistic about having to break 'the glass ceiling' (to use a feminist analogy) in their profession. These focus group discussions had confirmed that all teachers had experienced various degrees of change in their perceptions of themselves as NNSTs, and held hope for their future careers.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to address negative selfperceptions and feelings of inadequacy among NNSTs of TESOL, since teachers' awareness of their personal perceptions (and misconceptions) about self as language teachers is central to their growth as professionals. Based on the data reported in this study, the NNST Impostor Syndrome appears to exist among the sampled participants, though somewhat more strongly in the case of females (which seems to support the findings of other impostor syndrome studies noted earlier). During a period of one semester, teacher trainees were exposed to ideas challenging the notion of native speaker and non-native speaker status, listened to testimonials of near-peer role models, were encouraged to reflect on their own perceptions of their NNST identity and selfefficacy beliefs during their collage design, and took part in interviews and a focus group discussion. While positive changes among the teachers were documented, their experiences of taking part in this study will no doubt act as antecedents towards their new conceptualizations of self and NNST status in their future ELT careers.

However, fundamentally parallel to NNSTs' underlying notions of status inequality are external to establishing realities. Problems related credibility of NNSTs are not merely their individual problems, but problems of our society in general, and the TESOL field in particular. On an ideological level, the native/non-native speaker division is solely based on language proficiency, where the native speaker model divides the profession according to a caste system, and it should therefore be eliminated (Rajagopalan 2005, Kachru 1990; Pennycook 1992). Shin and Kellog (2007) point out that many Asian teachers, for example, lack confidence in their own teaching skills precisely because they define these in terms of English language skills. Indeed, anxiety may be felt by any beginning teacher, whether native or nonnative; however, 'when put next to native speaker, the NNSTs often experience a strong sense of fear that they will not attain the same level of proficiency, and that the ESL students may reject them preferring a native speaker as a teacher' (Greis 1985: 318).

Accordingly, this author joins Amin (2007) in her call for organizations such as the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL), IATEFL, TESOL, and TESOL affiliates to actively dismantle the native/nonnative speaker dichotomy. The TESOL Research Agenda (June 2000) had identified issues related to NNSTs as a Priority Research Area, and a question of research interest listed in the document is: To what extent, if any, are issues related to NNS professionals addressed by the TESOL teacher preparation curriculum? While the current study and that of Rajagopalan (2005) and Lee (2007) reflect concerted efforts to address this issue, much more

interventionist work is needed in this area. Rajagopalan (2005: 287) notes that while such developments are indeed most welcome and long overdue, there is still much work to be done by way of empowering the NNSTs and encouraging them to rethink their own roles in EFL. Undoubtedly, there is an urgent need to help NNSTs overcome the profoundly damaging deficit model of their own professional competence.

In similar vein, Inbar-Lourie (2005: 293) calls for 'carefully planned strategies of empowerment aimed at convincing NNSTs of the important contribution they can make to the teaching enterprise', yet points out that 'clearly any effort to bring about significant changes in the mindset of the NNSTs... is by no means going to be an easy task or one that will yield positive results overnight'. However, on a positive note, the author concludes that with the massive spread of English, currently accepted norms of native speaker status will be revisited and perhaps revised to include populations presently excluded from the native speaker speech community. Such a process will relocate the locus of power and control among English speakers, transforming and reshuffling notions of currently perceived native and non-native identities. Already the waters of English native-speaker norms are becoming muddied, which - according to Llurda (2004) creates the right conditions for the gradual acceptance of English as lingua franca, with a consequent decrease in the role of native-speaker teachers in setting the principles and norms on which this lingua franca will be taught in the future.

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APPENDIX

NNST Impostor Scale

Each statement below indicates your possible feelings and attitudes about yourself and your abilities. Please indicate how true you feel each of the statements is as it applies to you, using the scale below. Circle the right answer:

1 = not true at all 2 = rarely true 3 = sometimes true 4 = always true

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I feel that other people tend to believe that I am more competent than I am.	1	2	3	4
I am certain that my abilities don't reflect the level of my achievement.	1	2	3	4
3. Sometimes I am afraid I will be discovered for who or what I really am.	1	2	3	4
4. I find it hard to accept compliments about my teaching ability because they are mainly not true.	1	2	3	4
5. I feel I don't deserve the awards, recognition, and praise I regularly receive.	1	2	3	4
6. I feel inferior compared to Native Speaker Teachers.	1	2	3	4
7. I often wonder if my accent makes it hard for people to understand me.	1	2	3	4
8. So far, my accomplishments for my stage in life are perfectly adequate.	1	2	3	4
9. I am not sure if I am able to teach English well, since I am non-native speaker teacher.	1	2	3	4
10. I often achieve success on a project when I think I may have failed.	1	2	3	4
11. I often feel I am concealing secrets about myself from others.	1	2	3	4
12. My public and private self are not the same.	1	2	3	4
13. Very few people really know how average I am.	1	2	3	4
14. Most of my successful teaching experiences are due to luck.	1	2	3	4
15. When I stand in front of a classroom I feel like I don't belong there.	1	2	3	4