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"She Immediately Understood What I Was Trying to Say": Student Perceptions of NNESTs as Writing Tutors Pedagogy

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Introduction

The last two decades have seen significant growth in the number of studies that examine issues concerning non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs). Perhaps the central question that characterizes the non-native English-speaking teacher literature is this: who is best qualified to teach English, the native or the non-native teacher? Many studies have described the relative strengths and weaknesses of native and non-native teachers by investigating student and/or teacher perceptions through surveys, interviews, and journals (e.g., Braine, 1999; Davies, 1991; Medgyes, 1992; Kamhi-Stein, 2004; Liu, 1999). For example, native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) are assumed to be superior in linguistic competence as compared to non-native speakers and are considered owners of proper, authentic English (Widdowson, 1994). Conversely, NNESTs are credited with more conscious knowledge of grammar, language learning experience that they can share with learners, and the ability to empathize with language learners, as well as with serving as good role models (Braine 1999; Mahboob, 2004; Shin, 2008; Tang, 1997).

While several studies have documented the relative strengths of NESTs and NNESTs as language teachers in general, few studies have specifically investigated students' perceptions of

NESTs and NNESTs as teachers of writing. The current study aims to contribute to filling this gap by investigating perceptions of ESL students who received tutorial help from native and non-native English-speaking writing tutors through one-on-one writing conferences. Specifically, this study examines the educational benefits to English learners when the students and their tutors come from the same first language and cultural background.

Research on Student Perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs

Recent research suggests that student perceptions of NNESTs may depend on a number of factors, including students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds and the extent of their experience with NNESTs. For example, Saito (2005) examined students' attitudes toward non-native English-speaking teaching assistants at a university in the United States. The results showed that while English-speaking American students tended to view their NNESTs' lack of fluent command of English as a problem, students who had learned English as a second language were more likely to consider the first language background of their NNESTs as an asset. Similarly, Moussu (2007) demonstrated that although ESL students generally have more positive attitudes toward NESTs than NNESTs, students who are taught by NNESTs tend to be more positively inclined toward NNESTs than those who have not had NNESTs as teachers.

In another study of ESL students' perceptions of their NNESTs, Bae (2006) showed that her student participants had positive attitudes toward their NNESTs and appreciated NNESTs' knowledge about language structure and pedagogy. The students felt that NNESTs could understand their language learning difficulties better than could NESTs and viewed NNESTs as language learning role models who could inspire and encourage them in the learning process.

Not surprisingly, NNESTs scored higher on affective factors (e.g., more patient, understanding, and caring) than NESTs who had never learned another language. In a study of the perceptions of students enrolled in an intensive English program, Mahboob (2004) found that students perceived NESTs to be best at teaching oral skills, vocabulary, and culture and NNESTs to be more effective in teaching literacy skills and grammar. Students in his study recognized the unique attributes of NESTs and NNESTs and sought to benefit from interacting with both groups.

Turning the focus to EFL contexts, Rao (2008) surveyed Chinese EFL students' views of NESTs teaching English in China. The students in this study identified three main problems with their NESTs: (1) they tended to be less sensitive to the students' language learning difficulties than Chinese English teachers; (2) their Western teaching styles were often in conflict with Chinese students' learning styles; and (3) they had little familiarity with the local culture and the Chinese educational system. The author notes that the clash between the different teaching and learning expectations of NESTs and their Chinese EFL students is particularly significant. Most Chinese students accustomed to teacher-centered instruction and providing one correct answer to close-ended questions find the more holistic student-centered teaching approaches of Western teachers to be foreign, and NESTs often wonder why their Chinese students seem reticent to speak up and express their ideas. The author encourages Chinese English teachers to work collaboratively with NESTs to provide the maximum instructional benefit to the students.

Method

Participants

The current study is part of a larger investigation of native- and non-native teachers' feedback on college-level ESL students' writing (cf. Park, 2008). Four Korean ESL students (two male and two female) and four writing tutors (all female, two Korean and two American) served as participants. All four students were in their early twenties and were educated in Korea before coming to the United States. At the time of this study, all four students were enrolled in an intermediate reading and writing course in an intensive English program at a U.S. university. All four writing tutors were taking a course in teaching reading and writing to ESL students and were working toward their master's degree in TESOL at the same university. The two Korean tutors received their bachelor's degrees in Korea and came to the United States to pursue their M.A. in TESOL. As pre-service ESL teachers, none of the four tutors had much prior experience in teaching writing.

Procedures

Each student was paired with one of the four tutors for one-on-one writing conferences. As noted in Table 1, two pairs were each composed of a Korean student and a Korean tutor (NNEST pairs 1 and 2), and the other two were each composed of a Korean student and an American tutor (NEST pairs 1 and 2). Each pair had three separate one-on-one writing conferences about the students' first drafts on three different writing assignments from their intermediate reading and writing course. The three assignments were the second, third, and fourth essays of a total of five assignments in the course and focused on three aspects of

academic writing: narration, analysis, and comparison and contrast. Each conference lasted at least thirty minutes.

Pair	Tutor	Student
NNEST pair 1	Jiyoung (F)	Jongsoo (M)
NNEST pair 2	Mikyeong (F)	Minhee (F)
NEST pair 1	Patty (F)	Jihoon (M)
NEST pair 2	Sue (F)	Boram (F)

Table 1: The four tutor-student pairs[2]

At the conclusion of the third conference, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with each student participant. The student participants were interviewed in Korean so as to allow them to express their views freely in the language in which they felt most comfortable. The following questions were used to guide the interviews:

1. 선생님이 해주신 조언 중에 자신이 동의하지 않았던 것이 있었나요? 있었다면 동의하지 않은 이유는 무엇입니까? (Was there anything on which you did not agree with your tutor? If so, what was it and why did you not agree with her?)

2. 본인이 의도했던 의미를 선생님께 설명하는데 어려움이 있었나요? 있었다면 주로 어떤 것이었나요? (Did you have any difficulty explaining your intended meanings in your writing to your tutor? If so, what was it?)

3. 과외 도중 선생님의 피드백을 이해하는데 어려움이 있었나요? 있었다면 주로 어떤 것이었나요? (Did you have any difficulty understanding your tutor's feedback during the conferences? If so, what was it?)

4. 훌륭한 영어 쓰기 선생님의 자격이 무엇이라고 생각합니까? (What do you think are the qualifications of a good English writing teacher?)

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[2] All participant names are pseudonyms.

5. 미국 선생님 혹은 한국 선생님에게 특별히 배우고 싶은 것이 있나요? 있다면 어떤 것입니까? 그 이유는 무엇입니까? (What aspect of English would you like to learn from an American teacher? What aspect of English would you like to learn from a Korean teacher?)

Analysis

All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The interview data was analyzed to identify what the student paticipants thought of the conferences and how they perceived their tutors. In the results section, we highlight some of the recurring themes in the student responses.

Results

Advantages of having a shared mother tongue

Our analysis of the student interviews revealed that having the option to switch to the first language to talk about writing was one of the most significant benefits of having an NNEST as a writing tutor. The two students who were paired with American tutors obviously did not have this option and felt restricted in their ability to communicate their intended meanings. For example, Jihoon felt that his lack of oral skills in English prevented him from expressing his ideas fully during the conferences:

의사소통에 어려움이 생기니까 하고 싶은 말이 있어도 그냥 포기해 버릴때도 많았어요. 선생님의 제안에 제 의견을 덧붙이거나 내 본래 의도를 이야기 하고 싶어도 영어가 되어야 하죠.

(Because I had difficulty communicating in English, I often gave up trying to explain what I really wanted to say. I wanted to add my opinions to my tutor's suggestions and express my intended meanings but I couldn't because of my poor English.)

또 제가 쓴 표현을 선생님이 이해를 못하겠다고 설명을 해보래요 무슨 뜻으로 쓴건지. 그런데 한국말로 설명하면 진짜 간단한 건데 영어로 제 의도를 설명하려고 하니까 한숨밖에 안나와요. 설명한다고 해도 잘 설명했나 의문스럽고... 그래서 그냥 아예 설명을 할려고도 하지 않은 적도 많아요. 되게 답답해요.

(Another thing is that when she asked me to clarify some of my expressions, she couldn't understand. It's really simple to explain things in Korean, but when I tried to explain it in English, it was so hard I just sighed the whole time. When I did try, I wasn't sure whether I explained things right in English…So I often didn't even try to explain. It's really frustrating.)

In addition to a communication barrier caused by her limited oral proficiency in English, a difficulty Boram encountered was not being able to understand why her American tutor kept telling her to end her essay on a direct, conclusive note when she had always been taught to end an essay on an indirect note, a prominent feature in good Korean writing:

또 다른건 마지막에 한국식으로 여운을 남기는 말을 쓰고 싶었는데 선생님은 그걸 딱 지적하시면서 깔끔하게 결론을 지어야 한다고 하셨어요. 한국식으로 돌려서 함축적으로 말을 하고 싶은데 그런건 항상 지적을 하시더라구요. 그렇게 쓰면 안된다고.

(Another thing is that when I tried to end my paper with some indirect expressions [as writers are expected to in Korean writing] my tutor pointed out that it was not good, that I should use direct expressions and conclude cleanly. I like to write by implication, but she always pointed those out and said I shouldn't write like that.)

In contrast, Jongsoo and Minhee, who were paired with Korean tutors, did not seem to have any communication difficulties during the conferences. In fact, the NNEST pairs often resorted to Korean to negotiate meaning and discuss language learning strategies. For example, Minhee stated,

처음에 영어로 할때는 제가 하려고 하는 말을 잘 이해하지 못하셔서 제가 동의할 수 없는 피드백을 주셨던 적이 있어요. 그래서 제가 결국 한국말로 그런 뜻이 아니라고 설명했어요. 그니까 한국말로 했을 때는 그런 적이 없었어요.

(When I first tried to speak in English, my tutor didn't really understand what I wanted to say and gave me some feedback I did not agree with. So I explained in Korean that that wasn't what I had meant. Once I started speaking in Korean, I didn't have this difficulty.)

Similarly, Jongsoo appreciated the explanations his tutor provided in Korean:

한국말로 했기때문에 전혀 어려움이 없었어요. 제가 항상 궁금해 하고 어려워했던 것을 선생님이 시원시원하게 가르쳐 주셔서 좋았어요... 또 구구절절 설명하지 않아도 제가 무슨 말을 쓰려고 한건지 바로 이해를 하시고 도움을 주셨어요. 그건 선생님도 한국 사람이고 한국 학생들의 오류를 잘 이해하기 때문이겠죠.

(Because I was allowed to use Korean, I didn't have any difficulty. I loved that my tutor clearly explained things I was always curious about and what I thought was difficult…And even though I didn't explain my intended meaning in nitty gritty detail, she immediately understood what I was trying to say. It's probably because she is Korean and she understands Korean students' errors.)

Wanted: explicit, detailed feedback

All four students stated that they would like their writing teachers to provide explicit, detailed feedback on their writing. According to the students' accounts of the conferences, the Korean tutors provided more detailed feedback that was more closely matched to the students' needs than did the American tutors. This was probably due to the fact that the Korean tutors themselves had learned English as a second language and could identify with their students' difficulties. The native English-speaking tutors, on the other hand, had little knowledge of the specific linguistic and rhetorical challenges that the students faced when writing in English. For example, Jihoon felt lost when he was repeatedly asked by his tutor to add more details to his writing without being given concrete examples:

미국 선생님은 항상 뭔가 내용이 부족하다고 하셨어요. 전 할말을 다했는데 항상 더 쓰라고 하니까 뭘 써야할지 모르겠어요.

(My American tutor always told me that my content was insufficient. I wrote everything I wanted to say, so I really didn't know what else to add.)

Boram felt that her tutor's general feedback on her essay was not detailed enough. Like most other ESL students planning to study in American universities, she was eager to have every error corrected in her writing (cf. Leki, 1992).

선생님이 자세하게 한 문장 한 문장 설명하시지 않으셨고 그냥 전체적으로 간단하게 피드백을 주고 저한테 질문을 받는 식이었거든요. 좀 더 피드백을 자세하게 받고 싶은건 있었어요. 최대한 많이 틀린걸 지적해 주기를 원했거든요.

(She didn't try to look at my paper sentence by sentence; she gave me broad feedback over my whole paper and had me ask questions. I wanted to get more detailed feedback. I wanted her to correct my mistakes as much as possible.)

In contrast, Minhee and Jongsoo seemed considerably more satisfied with the kind of feedback they received from their Korean tutors. Specifically, Minhee appreciated her tutor's thorough explanations of grammar and writing strategies:

한국 선생님이 한국말로 뭔가 시원하지 않은 문법이나 학습 방법 같은 것들을 시원하게 설명해 주시잖아요...이번에 한국 선생님과 공부하면서 아웃라인 잡는 거라든지 쓰기 전략같은 방법적인 측면에서 많이 배웠어요. 이제 글쓰는게 더 자신감이 생기구요 실력도 많이 는거 같아서 기분이 좋아요.

(Korean teachers use Korean to clearly explain grammatical points or learning strategies that I have not been sure about...While studying with my Korean tutor, I learned a great deal about outlining and writing strategies. Now I feel more confident about my writing. I feel like my writing has improved. I'm happy about that.)

Jongsoo also valued the English learning strategies that his Korean tutor shared with him:

한국인 선생님이 가르쳐 주실 때는 본인이 공부했을 때 경험을 살려서 잘 설명을 해주셨어요. 학생입장에서 본인에게 어려운 게 뭐였나를 먼저 생각하고, 어떤 방법이 효과적이었는지, 또 학생들에게 더 이해되기 쉽게 설명하려고 하니까 좋았던거 같아요.

(During the tutoring sessions with my Korean tutor, she explained things to me based on her own experiences as a language learner. I liked the way she shared what was difficult for her and what methods worked for her and how she tried to explain things in ways that are easy for students to understand.)

Students seemed to notice that their non-native tutors, having been second language learners themselves, "have deeper insights into...the learning process" (Medgyes, 2001, p. 437). Reflecting on their own language learning experiences, non-native teachers can understand why their students make the language errors they make and can share their own strategies for improving language skills. Moreover, non-native teachers provide ESL students with an attainable model for what non-native English speakers could accomplish (Shin, 2007).

One technique often used by native English speakers to edit their writing, namely reading their paper aloud to see if every sentence sounds right, is not a very useful technique for ESL writers because they lack native speaker intuitions for knowing what sounds right in English (Shin, 2002). Instead, many ESL writers benefit more from formal explanations of grammar because many of them learned English through grammar-based methods. In the following, Jihoon shares that he did not receive adequate explanations about why one sentence was better than another:

> 문법적인 것을 물어보면 대개 이유를 설명하기 보다는 그게 더 자연스러운거니까 맞는거야 라고 하더라구요. ...미국 선생님은 자기 나라 말이니까 이유를 한번도 생각해 보지 않았겠죠. 그러면 전 뭔가 시원하게 이해가 안되는 느낌이 들어요.
>
> (Whenever I asked questions concerning grammar, my American tutor just said that one sentence is right because it sounds natural, without explaining why...She might never have thought of the reasons because it's her native language. That's when I felt like I didn't quite understand things.)

Jihoon reasons that his American tutor does not have to think about English grammar because English is her native language. He thinks that NNESTs who share the same native language with students can better understand students' intended meanings and predict their difficulties:

미국 선생님은 틀렸다고만 하지 왜 그렇게 쓰면 안되는지 시원하게 설명해 주지를 않아요. 그러니까 다음에 또 틀리고 그래요. 그냥 한국 선생님이 속시원히 설명해 주시면 좋겠어요. 같은 한국 사람으로써 한국 학생들에게 왜 그런 문제가 발생하는지 더 잘 설명해 줄수 있잖아요.

(American teachers usually say something is wrong and don't explain clearly why it is wrong. That's why I keep making the same mistakes again. I would rather like to learn those things clearly from Korean teachers. I think that they can better explain why Korean students make the mistakes they make because they are also Korean.)

Boram concurred that Korean teachers are better at explaining English grammar and writing than native speakers:

문법이나 쓰기는 한국 선생님이 더 잘 설명해 주는 것 같아요. 미국 선생님께 배웠던 것을 생각해보면 체계적으로 문법을 배운거 같지는 않아요. 그냥 알고 있던 것을 조금 더 자세하게 알게 되었다는 정도구요.

(I think that Korean teachers teach English grammar and writing better. When I think back to my experience of learning English grammar from American teachers, I feel that they were not very systematic. It's like I learned just a little more than what I already knew.)

Jongsoo also felt that Korean teachers have much to offer students in terms of learning strategies:

내가 공부해 보니까 이런게 헷갈리더라 그럼 이렇게 이해를 하고 외우면
쉽다라든지..같은 모국어를 쓰니까 비슷한 실수나 문제를 가지고 있더라구요.
그니까 자신이 했던 실수를 학생은 좀 더 잘 극복할 수 있도록 도움을 주고 그러는게
좋았어요.

(For example, she pointed out a few things that were confusing to her when she was a student and let me know how to understand and memorize them easily. Since we speak the same native language, we make similar mistakes and have similar problems. It was great that she helped me overcome those mistakes.)

Overall, the students recognized distinct advantages of receiving writing help from Korean tutors. As Cook (1999) points out, multilingual (non-native speaker) teachers are probably more capable and qualitatively different from monolingual (native speaker) teachers. With non-native teachers who share students' mother tongue, students not only use their first language as a communicative resource to negotiate their meaning but also benefit from detailed feedback that accurately addresses problems in their writing.

Discussion and Conclusion

The current study sought to examine ESL students' perceptions of native- and non-native English speakers as writing tutors. Specifically, this study investigated students' perceptions of non-native English-speaking tutors who shared the students' first language and culture. Contrary to the popular perception that NESTs are more highly qualified as language teachers than NNESTs, the results of this study indicate that NNESTs who share students' mother tongue can be as effective as, if not more effective than, NESTs in helping ESL students improve their writing in English.

Although this study is limited by the small number of participants, the findings revealed that the student participants clearly preferred Korean tutors over native English-speaking tutors. The students who were paired with native English-speaking tutors experienced difficulties in orally communicating their intended meanings in English during the writing conferences. Explaining the subtle nuances of their thinking in English proved to be quite painstaking at times, which sometimes led the students to give up on trying to express their ideas altogether. These students also felt that their tutors' comments were too general and did not adequately answer questions regarding English grammar and rhetoric. In contrast, the students who were paired with non-native English-speaking (Korean) tutors welcomed and took advantage of the option to switch to Korean to negotiate meaning. As a result, they received explanations that were carefully matched to their specific language learning needs. They felt that their tutors diagnosed their writing difficulties precisely and suggested useful techniques to overcome their difficulties.

It is noteworthy that the students' expectations for their writing tutors closely matched what many NNESTs consider their strengths and qualifications for language teaching: the ability to understand students' errors, share language learning strategies, and explain English grammar rules and rhetoric in ways that students can understand (Braine, 2004; Medgyes, 2001). Because the NNESTs are also second language learners, they tend to possess deeper insights into the process of acquiring language skills. Moreover, they tend to score high on empathy toward students trying to master a second language and serve as successful models of what students can aspire to become. Although the students in this study preferred Korean tutors over native English speakers for their writing tutorials, they recognized the unique

contributions of NESTs. The students agreed that NESTs are superior to NNESTs in teaching oral English skills and introducing students to the target culture. This finding is consistent with Mahboob's (2004) observation that students tend to prefer learning listening and speaking skills from NESTs but writing and grammar from NNESTs. On the whole, the students in this study, as those in previous studies, accepted the unique strengths of NESTs and NNESTs and wanted to benefit from both types of teachers.

This finding carries an important implication for teacher recruitment and professional development. Since NESTs and NNESTs have complementary strengths, it seems worthwhile to maintain a balance of NESTs and NNESTs in English language programs, in order to provide students with the best learning opportunities. NESTs and NNESTs should be encouraged to work together to complement one another and maximize their potential as language professionals (Kamhi-Stein, 1999; Mahboob, 2004; Medgyes, 2001; Rao, 2008). De Oliveira and Richardson (2004) describe a collaborative NNEST-NEST partnership in which the authors were able to benefit from each other's expertise. For example, by collaborating with De Oliveira (an NNEST from Brazil), Richardson (an American NEST) became better able to understand the process of learning ESL or EFL. De Oliveira shared strategies that she used to learn English, many of which Richardson subsequently suggested to her students. In turn, De Oliveira gained in-depth knowledge about American culture and acquired idioms, vocabulary, and pragmatic competence. When NESTs and NNESTs collaborate, students ultimately benefit from the shared expertise of their teachers.

The findings of the current study are significant not only for English education in Korea, but also for that in other countries where English is taught and learned as a foreign language. Since the two NNESTs who participated in this study shared the students' native language and culture, the results can apply to other EFL contexts where the students and teachers share the same language and culture. Despite increasing awareness of NNESTs' apparent strengths in TESOL, NNESTs continue to exhibit low self-confidence in their linguistic and teaching skills (Moussu, 2007). The fear of being viewed by students, fellow teachers, and administrators as incompetent teachers can be overwhelming for NNESTs. However, with greater awareness of their strengths as language teachers and persistent efforts to build high levels of English competence and pedagogical knowledge, NNESTs can realize their full potential as TESOL professionals.

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