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Bridging the Gap between  
Native and Non-Native  
English-Speaking Teachers:  
Insights from Bilingualism Research

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# Bridging the Gap between Native and Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers: Insights from Bilingualism Research

For years, the field of English language teaching has been divided between supporters of native versus non-native English-speaking teachers, with a widely reported bias for the native model. The following paper analyses this long-standing debate by discussing how the bias for native English-speaking teachers arises from a traditionally monolingual point of view which no longer holds in our multilingual societies. Specifically, in light of recent research on bilingualism, not only is the concept of the monolingual native speaker an idealisation rather than a reality, but there are also substantial changes that native speakers display in the use of their first language (i.e. 'attrition') as a result of speaking a second language. This evidence undermines the supposed stability of the native language and the traditional bias for native English-speaking teachers. Since strengths and weaknesses can be found in all teachers, also given the current status of English as a lingua franca, there are plenty of reasons for abandoning this outdated dichotomy and focus instead on teachers' skills and expertise, to ultimately allow and encourage cooperation amongst complementary English language teachers.

**Keywords:** English language teaching; native speaker bias; bilingualism; first language attrition; English as a lingua franca.

## Introduction

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The English language teaching (ELT) field has been split in half for years: on the one hand, supporters of the Native English-Speaking Teacher (NEST) model believe that *native* teachers are better teachers than non-natives, as it is the language of the former group of speakers that learners aim to master; on the other hand, supporters of the Non-Native English-Speaking Teacher (NNEST) model claim that *non-native* teachers are equal to their native counterparts as teachers of a language that they, too, have learnt successfully. The division between the two is exacerbated by the widely reported (monolingual) bias for native teachers of English (Foley 2007; Berger 2014) who are usually preferred over non-natives despite the teaching qualifications and experience that the latter group of speakers may have. This paper delves into the topic by first examining the NEST bias in ELT, to then demystify some of the common assumptions surrounding the concept of nativeness (both the native language<sup>1</sup> and the native speaker) by drawing insights from empirical evidence and research in second language acquisition and first language attrition (e.g. Linck et al. 2009; Sorace and Filiaci 2006; Chamorro et al. 2016; Mennen 2004). The NEST-NNEST debate is finally drawn to a close by outlining strengths and weaknesses of different teacher models (Árva and Medgyes 2000; Hayes 2009; Song and Gonzalez Del Castillo 2015) also in light of the current status of English as a *lingua franca* (cf. Jenkins 2009; Seidlhofer 2009), ultimately reflecting on why and how different teachers should be seen as complementary rather than dichotomous, thus co-operate, in twenty-first century English language teaching.

### The Bias For Native English-Speaking Teachers In Language Teaching

As speakers of a specific language from birth -- that is, as *native* speakers of a

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we use the terms ‘native language’ and ‘first language’ (L1) interchangeably to refer to the language acquired during childhood first, as this constitutes common practice; we highlight the issues evoked by this terminology in the section ‘Problematising Nativeness’.

language—we are able to communicate in said language as well as being endowed with knowledge of sociocultural aspects that pertain to the community of people who also speak the same language from birth. In this sense, native speakers are not only a source of authenticity in regard to their language, but also with reference to the way that they, along with their community, think of the world. Clouet (2006, p. 63) goes as far as saying that ‘learning a language is inseparable from learning alternatives to our native systems of values and codes of behaviour’. Under these circumstances, the NEST would thus represent the best model for teaching, as native speakers can provide a thorough insight into their own world as well as being able to help with pronunciation, supporting learners to build their confidence when communicating in a foreign language. NEST privilege stems from the reasons mentioned above; a privilege that is ‘unearned’, according to Berger (2014, p. 39). Speaking in the first person, Berger (2014, p. 40) highlights the following privileges that she encountered as a native speaker of English herself, as she began teaching English only with a US undergraduate degree in hand:

- ease in obtaining a teaching job due to her English name and appearance;
- confidence from intuition as a native speaker of the language;
- unquestioned credibility as an English teacher, and;
- freedom to teach in a fun and casual way.

Berger (104, pp. 40-42) further reports that the hiring processes in English language schools rely on the assumption that native speakers are better teachers than non-natives: NESTs are automatically asserted as being adequate for the job, never being questioned and left free to decide whichever teaching method they feel more comfortable adopting, using their intuition to solve linguistic issues in the teaching process. Indeed, many are the job advertisements placed by English language schools seeking native speakers regardless of their qualifications. Foley (2007, p. 8), for instance, reports the following advertisement, placed in a national

newspaper by the Korean government agency:

Type one teachers require:

- a certificate in TESOL or three years full-time teaching experience with a graduate degree in TESOL or experience and interest in Korean culture and language.

Type two teachers:

- only have to be native speakers of English with a bachelor's degree in any field.

The question, as argued by Foley (2007, p. 8), is why this demand for untrained native speakers of English exists (and persists). An answer could be sought in the native speakers' language competence: for instance, research looking at the behaviour of five poorly qualified British NESTs and four qualified Hungarian NNESTs in Budapest secondary schools finds that the main advantage of the former group of teachers is their better ability in the use of English in the most disparate communicative contexts (Árva and Medgyes 2000). The same research also highlights some of the same privileges reported above by Berger (2014), specifically their reliance on intuition and their lack of use of course materials, which they replace instead with newspapers, posters, and worksheets, ultimately conveying a 'casual attitude' when teaching. Despite NESTs serving as excellent models for the language, and their lessons being rich in cultural references, the downsides of their teaching are evident in this study when it comes to explicit English grammar knowledge, due to the lack of ELT qualifications on their behalf (Árva and Medgyes 2000, p. 361-365). The two researchers conclude that 'poorly qualified NESTs can do a decent job as long as they are commissioned to do what they can do best: converse' (Árva and Medgyes 2000, p. 369).

However, the problem with the NEST bias discussed so far does not rely exclusively on the lack of teaching qualifications, therefore explicit knowledge, that NESTs may have when it comes to the teaching of English grammatical structures: bigger issues surround the very same concept of nativeness, and, consequently, that of the native speaker. In the following section, we thus delve deeper into the discussion of nativeness, by drawing evidence from research on bilingualism.

### **Problematising Nativeness: Research-Based Insights**

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At the beginning of this paper, we started by reporting the widely held belief that native speakers are a source of authenticity in regard to their language and the language community that they belong to. Davies (2003, p.1) expands on this, by saying:

The concept of the native speaker seems clear enough, doesn't it? It is surely a common sense idea, referring to people who have a special control over a language, insider knowledge about 'their' language. They are the models we appeal to for the 'truth' about the language, they know what the language is ('Yes, you can say that') and what the language isn't ('No, that's not English, Japanese, Swahili...') [...] But just how special is the native speaker?

As a matter of fact, the concept of the native speaker has historically been considered so important that it has been the centre of linguistics and language research for years from a typically monolingual point of view: Bloomfield (1927, p. 435) argues that '[n]o language is like the native language that one learned at one's mother's knee; no one is ever perfectly sure in a language afterwards acquired'. After him, Chomsky (1956, p. 3) describes the native speaker as 'an ideal speaker-listener' whose language belongs to a specific speech community and is the model for grammar, not being influenced by factors such as memory limitations, distractions, random or characteristic mistakes. These views have influenced our present day

understanding of native speakers, usually seen as gatekeepers of their first language (L1) and that second language (L2) learners should aspire to be *like* (as terminology commonly employed in L2 acquisition research, such as ‘native-like’ or ‘near-native’, unfortunately reinforces). We will now examine the different issues that arise with such an idealised view of the native speaker in ELT.

### **Issues With Native Speaker Characteristics And Terminology**

The typical characteristics associated with native speakers, which distinguish them from non-native speakers, as reported in Davies (2013, p. 3) are the following:

- the acquisition of the L1 during childhood;
- intuitions about the acceptability and productiveness of the idiolectal grammar;
- intuitions about the standard native language grammar;
- the ability to produce spontaneous discourse with firm communicative competence;
- the ability to write all sorts of genres and types of literature at any level, with no difficulty and creatively, and;
- the ability to interpret and translate fluently into their native language.

Importantly, Davies (2013, p.4) stresses that all of these characteristics are contingent on the very first point: nativeness is mainly defined by the early acquisition of a language, which involves in turn all of the intuitions and abilities mentioned above. However, there are different issues surrounding the very first point: for instance, as noted in Hackert (2012, p. 13), the main assumption is that the native speaker is monolingual, when nowadays ‘many people live in multilingual societies and we all live in multidialectal societies’ (Davies 2013, p. 17). As a result, terms such as ‘first language’ or ‘mother tongue’ are highly problematic, when a speaker may have acquired more than one language from birth, and (any) one parental figure



may have provided bilingual or multilingual input to a child. Davies (2013, p. 16-17) further highlights how the language which serves as the L1 may change over time, with a language learnt later in life replacing the language learnt first. It is thus particularly important to highlight that the so-called mother tongue or native language may not always be the ‘dominant’ language (cf. Grosjean 1997), as bilinguals acquire and use their languages with different people, in different situations of life, and for different purposes. Something less obvious but of particular interest to the current discussion is that with changes in language dominance also come changes in the native language with regards to different aspects (e.g. vocabulary access, choice and interpretation of certain grammatical structures, and pronunciation, as discussed more in depth in the next section). We will thus now focus on the important effects that the constant use of a second language has on the native language.

### **Issues With Native Language Stability: L1 Attrition**

The idea that native speakers are the best models of the language -- and, thus, that NESTs are the best teacher model -- is based on the assumption that the way native speakers use and understand their native language is immune to change. However, some empirical evidence in bilingualism research shows that this is *not* the case.

Indeed, some relatively recent research in the field focuses on the changes in the L1 by effects of speaking an L2: this phenomenon is usually referred to as (L1) ‘attrition’ (for a chronological overview of studies in the field, see Schmid 2016). Despite the term evoking possible concepts of erosion or loss, what really happens in the language behaviour of a bilingual speaker is much more complex and dynamic. A series of conditions, external to the language system, can contribute to the manifestation of signs of L1 attrition (e.g. emigration, regular and prolonged use of the L2, and a decrease in L1 use on a daily basis).

Different aspects (or ‘domains’) of the language system can be affected by L1 attrition at different stages of prolonged exposure to the L2: namely, access to vocabulary (i.e. the ‘lexicon’), the understanding and use of certain grammatical structures, whose meaning is context dependent (i.e. ‘syntax’ and the ‘interface’ of syntax with other language domains; more on this below), as well as pronunciation in the L1 (at the level of ‘phonetic’ and ‘phonological’ changes). Some research on L1 attrition shows that underlying structural knowledge of the first language is partially affected by intensive L2 use (e.g. Schmid et al. 2004). However, the participants in this study belong to a specific population (namely, long-term migrants) with very specific features (i.e. emigration from the L1 country for more than three decades and low levels of literacy in the L1). Instead, the more recent profile of expatriates (i.e. people who have moved to another country and have prolonged contact with the L2) is rather different in terms of length of residency in the L2 country and level of education. L1 maintenance is also easier for L2 expatriates thanks to massive access to media, and it is therefore unusual to find migrants whose L1 knowledge has dramatically been affected, unless as a result of particularly traumatic events related to the L1 (see the case of German Jews in Anglophone countries reported in Schmid 2002).

More recent research also shows that first signs of attrition appear very early as a consequence of intensive exposure to the L2, and they result in difficulties in retrieving vocabulary as soon as after three months of being immersed in an L2-speaking environment (e.g. Linck et al. 2009). These studies support the idea that the two languages are active in the mind of a bilingual speaker at all times (e.g., Dijkstra and Van Heuven 2002; Kroll et al. 2005; Marian and Spivey 2003): to allow the quick and successful access to the lexicon in one language, the bilingual speaker needs to ‘inhibit’ the language not in use in that particular moment (cf. Levy et al. 2007). This mechanism is not costless for the bilingual speaker, resulting in slower access to the lexicon in the L1 or the L2 in comparison with the monolingual

speaker of either language. However, the slow-down effects in lexical retrieval are not permanent: the more frequent the access to vocabulary in either language, the shorter the time it takes to retrieve words. Therefore, from an initial stage characterised by difficulties in balancing the access and inhibition of the two languages, bilinguals eventually evolve into skilled users of ‘code-switching’ -- i.e. the use of linguistic elements from two languages in the same sentence or conversation, which is a normal part of bilingual experience (Grosjean 2010; Poplack 2011) as well as an indication of bilinguals’ cognitive flexibility (Green and Abutalebi 2013; Beatty-Martinez and Dussias 2017).

Grammatical changes in the L1 are likely to be noticed in very specific contexts: indeed, syntactic attrition has been defined as ‘selective’ in nature (cf. Sorace 2000; Tsimpli et al. 2004), and, according to the Interface Hypothesis (cf. Sorace and Filiaci 2006), changes in the L1 are (a) noticed in grammatical structures where the language allows ‘optionality’ and (b) delimited to the ‘interface’ between elements of grammar and context cues. For example, sentences containing pronouns, such as (1a) and (1b) below (adapted from Tsimpli et al. 2004), although being structurally similar, are interpreted differently in different languages:

- (1) a. Il portiere saluta il postino<sub>i</sub> mentre lui<sub>i</sub> apre la porta.
- b. The porter<sub>i</sub> greets the postman while he<sub>i</sub> opens the door.

‘Null subject’ languages, such as Italian, allow the *omission* of pronouns (such as ‘lui’ above) when these refer to the subject of the main clause (such as ‘il portiere’); when pronouns are explicit, or ‘overt’, such as in the example above, they instead signal that the pronoun refers to a different referent (i.e. ‘il postino’) -- cf. Carminati’s (2002) Position of Antecedent Strategy (PAS). On the other hand, ‘non-null subject’ languages, such as English, require the use of overt pronouns, which are always interpreted as referring to the subject of the main clause (i.e.

‘he’ referring to ‘the porter’). In bilingual speakers of different language combinations, the interpretation of sentences in the L1 can be susceptible to the preferred resolution in the L2, with Italian ‘attriters’ interpreting pronouns in sentences like (1a) as referring to the subject (‘il portiere’) rather than the object. Interestingly, the overextension of the scope of overt subject pronouns has also been found to an even greater extent in studies in L2 acquisition (cf. Sorace and Filiaci 2006; Belletti, Bennati and Sorace 2007), where near-native speakers of Italian would produce and accept these pronouns in sentences such as (2b) when monolinguals would normally produce (2c):

- (2)           a. Perché Giovanna non è venuta?  
                  ‘Why didn’t Giovanna come?’
- b. Perché **lei** non ha trovato un taxi.
- c. Perché \_ non ha trovato un taxi.  
                  ‘Because she couldn’t find a taxi.’

The susceptibility of interface structures is ascribed to two main factors: a cross-linguistic condition (i.e. the influence of specific features of the L2 transferred to the L1) and the complexity of integrating both elements of discourse (namely, grammar and context) to correctly comprehend and produce the L1 (cf., among others, Hulk and Müller 2000; Paradis and Navarro 2003; Serratrice et al. 2004; Sorace et al. 2009). If, as argued earlier, we accept that the two languages are always active in the bilingual mind, and that bilinguals constantly need to control both languages in order to avoid interferences, the constant need to inhibit one over the other may result in less attentional resources available for other tasks (such as linguistic ones): this may explain the convergence between L1 attriters and L2 near-natives in

the overextension of overt pronouns, as well as suggesting that L2 near-native speaker of English do so to a greater extent as it is more costly for them to inhibit their dominant L1 -- i.e. Italian -- than for L1 attriters to inhibit their secondary L2 -- i.e. English (for a thorough discussion of inhibitory control and resource allocation in bilingual speakers cf. Sorace 2011, 2014, 2016).

Lastly, phonetic and phonological changes are also reported in the L1, though research in this area is relatively limited. The earliest study is Flege's (1987), who investigates voice onset time (VOT; that is, the time between the release of a stop consonant and the onset of vibration of the vocal cords) in French and English: an increase in experience in the L2 is found to trigger bi-directional influence in the production of bilingual speech sounds. Further research examining VOT in the L1 and L2 of five speakers of Brazilian Portuguese, who are long-term residents in the US, also corroborates this finding, with mutual interactions of the L1 and the L2 affecting L2 phonetics (Major 1992). Phonological changes are also reported in only a few studies to date, with intonation being subject to bi-directional interference, from the L1 to the L2 and, vice-versa, from the L2 to the L1 (cf. for instance Mennen 2004; de Leeuw et al. 2012).

Overall, the studies presented in this section seem to be broadening the meaning of language attrition by adding temporary changes in the L1 to the more traditional examples of loss and erosion typically associated with the term. Importantly, even more recent research reports findings on the short-term effects of the L2 on the L1. For instance, in a study of Spanish-English bilinguals living in the US for more than five years, Chamorro et al. (2016) find that attrition effects decrease as a result of re-exposure to the L1 after only one week. As well as reinforcing the hypothesis that a bilingual mode bears temporary cognitive efforts which results in changes when accessing and using the L1, these studies also seem to suggest that openness to changes in the L1 might be a sign of successful L2 acquisition and should thus

be seen in a positive light. In the next section, we turn to the relevance of attrition for the NEST-vs-NNEST debate.

### **Joining Native and Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers in the Modern English Language Classroom**

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Having outlined the different issues connected with the traditional view of the native speaker and the native language, we now direct our attention to the possible challenges that native speakers of English face when teaching their native language, as well as outlining the strengths of non-native teachers. Finally, we consider how teachers can, and should, complement each other in the modern English language classroom.

#### **Native Teachers' Challenges As Potential L1 Attriters**

As argued in the previous section, language attrition potentially undermines the stability of the native language, and, subsequently, that of the native speaker. This therefore challenges the NEST bias in ELT as well. However, the magnitude of potential language attrition depends on some variables pertaining to the native language teacher -- for instance, immersion in an L2 context, as well as language learning motivation and attitudes. Indeed, given that many native teachers develop their career abroad, they often teach their L1 in an L2-speaking environment. Even if a high level of proficiency in the L2 is not always required of them, the majority of language teachers have a predisposition for languages, possibly leading them to L2 cultural assimilation, and a switch in language dominance (Grosjean 2013), which would ultimately result in L1 attrition.

A further factor that may influence the degree of attrition in native language teachers is the frequency of use of the L1 and the L2. According to the Activation Threshold Hypothesis, the more frequently a linguistic item is activated, the lower its 'activation threshold' is,

meaning it will be easier to activate the same item later on (Paradis 2000; Köpke 2002; Gürel 2004). Therefore, the more NESTs use their native language, the lower the degree of attrition they may experience. Importantly, as evidenced in Schmid (2011), the constant use of the L1 in a professional context is correlated with lower levels of L1 attrition. However, not all NESTs employ the L1 as the main vernacular language when teaching: some may speak entirely in English, while others may at times switch to an L2 according to the difficulty of the activity they are teaching. The variation in teaching strategies thus impacts the degree of L1 attrition, with teachers often employing code-switching being impacted less when retrieving words in either language than those who code-switch rarely (cf. earlier section on lexical attrition and code-switching).

Lastly, the interesting findings from L1 attrition studies and L2 acquisition outlined in the previous section, which point towards convergence of attriters and proficient L2 learners, seem to be particularly interesting to the present discussion. Ultimately, not only is the native speaker (teacher)'s L1 open to changes, but the way in which the L1 system changes may resemble that of a highly proficient L2 speaker: though more research should be trying to investigate these findings in different bilingual populations. This evidence seems to suggest that the gap between the L1 of native speakers who speak an L2 proficiently and the L2 of competent non-native speakers may be even more narrow than traditionally thought.

Overall, NESTs present great individual variation when it comes to L1 attrition, due to differences in L1/L2 use, the context in which English teaching takes place (i.e. an L1- or an L2-speaking environment), and language learning motivation and attitudes. Although native teachers may be less prone to attrition than other bilinguals, due to the teaching strategies that they adopt, they may still be affected to a certain extent. As argued in the previous section, L1 attrition may be manifested to different degrees in slower word recall (the 'tip-of-the-tongue' phenomenon), a different interpretation of certain grammatical structures, as well as deviations

in pronunciation from that of native monolinguals. More research is however needed to precisely evaluate the degree of L1 attrition, as well as awareness thereof, in this specific population.

### **Non-Native Teachers' Strengths**

If, on the one hand, there are potential challenges that NESTs may face when teaching their L1 in an L2 context, and more simply as a result of speaking an L2, on the other hand there are upsides with NNESTs' teaching practice that are often overlooked. Indeed, in a study of five non-native teachers' classroom practices in the US, Song and Gonzalez Del Castillo (2015) highlight the perceived strengths of non-native teachers in different teaching areas. With regards to their 'linguistic competence', the fact that NNESTs are *de facto* bilingual and multilingual speakers themselves is seen as an advantage, as they are able to resort to their L1 to explain difficult concepts in the L2, as well as being better able to understand English language learners' (ELLs') various accents (when they share the same L1 as their students'); they also possess explicit linguistic knowledge (for instance, of phonology, grammar, vocabulary, as well as reading and listening comprehension skills) which helps them in their teaching practice. Moreover, when it comes to NNESTs' 'sociocultural competence', they are able to understand ELLs' cultures and life challenges, as well as being open-minded to other cultures, ultimately being role-models for ELLs. Here, we would like to point out that NNESTs can not only serve as role models for ELLs with regard to their sociocultural competence, but also when it comes to their linguistic practice, as they are effectively successful learners of the language they are teaching. Lastly, as reported in Song and Gonzalez Del Castillo (2015), NNESTs employ an array of pedagogical strategies to meet ELLs' needs based on their language acquisition, and plan their lessons in advance, using different teaching aids (e.g.



visual and audio aids, such as writing down oral utterances, making use of the International Phonetic Alphabet, and using grouping strategies).

A similar perspective on NNESTs' teaching strengths emerges from Hayes (2009), following interviews with seven Thai teachers of English working in secondary schools. The NNESTs interviewed report using English alongside Thai and Thai dialects (such as Lao) as the combination of the two languages enhances the chances of learning for their students. The NNESTs interviewed use different teaching activities, such as outdoor ones (e.g. bringing students outside to learn by playing), and careful preparation comes before delivering their lessons -- ultimately matching the same strengths and pedagogical practices outlined in Song and Gonzalez Del Castillo (2015). What emerges from the interviews with NNESTs in Hayes (2009) is a humanistic approach to teaching, which focuses not only on the teaching of the language itself, but also on the shared human experience between teacher and learner; these teachers feel that they carry great social responsibilities within their societies. Ultimately, to put it in Hayes' (2009, p. 9) words: 'teachers' nativeness [...] needs to be given its due prominence in [...] teaching and learning English as a foreign language in context, rather than disproportionate attention paid to 'non-nativeness' in terms of English language context'.

### **Complementary Roles of NESTs and NNESTs**

In light of all of the evidence reviewed so far, we believe it is more useful to see native and non-native teachers as having *complementary* roles in the teaching of English nowadays. In modern ELT, all NESTs should work side by side with NNESTs: for instance, the former group of teachers may be able to help students develop their conversational skills (albeit the potential of L1 attrition for teachers who speak an L2, which may impact different domains of their English from time to time, as argued above), as well as insight knowledge of socio-cultural aspects pertaining to the English-speaking world. NNESTs, on their behalf, may serve as

perfect examples of successful L2 learners for their students, being able to use a range of pedagogies (cf. Song and Gonzalez Del Castillo 2015; Hayes 2009) which draw from the shared linguistic and cultural L1 background that NNESTs and students have in common. Ultimately, all teachers should be aware of the need for complementary teaching skills and exploit their individual potential by working jointly.

Although the main aim of this paper has been to highlight why the bias for the native teachers in ELT needs to be reconsidered given the evidence that emerges from bilingualism research, one last, additional consideration regarding the status of English nowadays is in order before closing. The bias for native speakers in the teaching of a language is inevitably tied to the idea that the language belongs to them as traditional ‘owners’ of the language (as we mentioned when introducing said bias). However, with the rise of English as a global language -- i.e. English as a *lingua franca* (ELF) -- it is hard to see the language as belonging exclusively to the people who speak it from birth (see, among others, Jenkins 2009; Seidlhofer 2009). In fact, native speakers of English are the minority (around 320-380 million), with 300-500 million L2 speakers who speak English as an official second language in their country, and the highest number of English speakers being non-native, from 500 million to one billion speakers (Crystal 2003 p. 107; cf. Kachru 1992). Precisely, according to the latest edition of the Ethnologue (Eberhard, Simons and Fennig 2021), 369.9 million people speak English as an L1 and 978.2 million people speak the language as an L2 (either as an official L2 or as a foreign/additional language). An analysis of the peculiarities of ELF would be beyond the scope of the present discussion, but we want to stress how crucial it is to recognise that, given the status of English nowadays, people may have a variety of different reasons for learning the language, and that their target may or may not be native speakers’ English (which, in itself, is also incredibly varied and does not correspond to one monolithic entity; for reference, see McArthur’s circle of World English in Crystal 1995). In this light, an American NEST, for

instance, may be more useful to those who have US English (which, in itself, also contains several varieties) as their target (perhaps because interested in American culture, or fascinated by US accents), whereas an NNEST may provide more useful strategies to those who want to learn the language to communicate with people from different L1s. Ultimately, conceptualising ELF as a distinct manifestation of English, which is *not* tied to its native speakers, allows most of the English teachers in the world to perceive and define themselves as competent users of ELF, rather than perpetuating their non-nativeness (cf. Seidlhofer 2005), which in relation to ELF is seen as irrelevant. It is only by placing native and non-native English-speaking teachers on an equal footing that we can begin to bridge the gap between the two. In closing, here is a question and some pertinent remarks by Farrell (2015, p. 87): ‘[...] when was the last time we asked for a native speaker of English medical doctor? A medical doctor is qualified or not and it is not *Who* the doctor is, but it is *How* he or she practices medicine that is most important for the patient.’ We believe the same perspective should begin to be adopted, and that equal opportunities should be given to all qualified teachers, in twenty-first century ELT.

## **Conclusion**

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Throughout the paper, we outlined the distinction between native and non-native English-speaking teachers and highlighted the widely diffused monolingual bias for NESTs. We then proceeded to show how this bias is unfounded, given the different issues surrounding the very central concept of nativeness, as well as empirical evidence from research in second language acquisition and first language attrition, pointing towards the fact that the native language is open to changes across the lifespan of a bilingual individual. These reasons, coupled with the strengths and weaknesses that can be found in all teachers -- also in light of lingua franca English, which unties the language from its native speakers -- led us to stress that all language teachers should be seen as equally valid in modern classrooms, as long as they

hold the necessary English teaching qualifications and expertise. English language teachers can, and by all means should, complement each other, to ultimately provide the joint support and comprehensive help that learners of English need nowadays. In closing, this paper has outlined the fallacy in the NEST-bias within ELT by drawing evidence from recent research on bilingualism, thus representing a first attempt at joining the NEST-NNEST gap through the use of an interdisciplinary approach. In the future, empirical research could investigate how to close this gap by scrutinising how different teachers can operate, and best complement each other, in the modern English language classroom.

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