

# ELT Ireland bulletin



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## 'nNESTs can be just as good as NESTs'

by Marek Kiczowskiak (Polish your Languages)

Most of us are aware of the strengths that Native English Speaker Teachers (NESTs) have, such as knowledge of idioms, or a 6th sense about the language. As a result, NESTs were - and to a great extent still are - the obvious first choice, a priori considered better teachers than any nNEST (non-Native English Speaker Teacher). However, this situation has been changing - albeit slowly - with more and more renowned language schools giving equal opportunities to nNESTs, realising that they too can be equally good teachers.

As a result, this article will highlight some of the strengths a typical nNEST has and argue that giving them equal opportunities can have a positive effect on the TEFL industry as a whole, raising fair competitiveness, improving relations between nNESTs and NESTs and increasing the quality of teaching.

I will now present four key strengths which are possessed by nNESTs and can benefit their learners:

nNESTs are role models of successful language learning. In other words, they're a walking proof that what they teach works, and that it is possible to master a language, which can give extra confidence and motivation to students. They will also have gained invaluable practical insights and will as a result be able to give their students important language learning tips.

nNESTs know how you feel. Having learned English themselves, any nNEST will be able to appreciate and understand the effort you're putting in to finally get the 3rd person 's' right. After all, they've been there themselves. And in my opinion, empathy is vital in teaching. In addition, having overcome the quirks of the English language, a nNEST can anticipate and solve language problems really well.

nNESTs often speak the student's first language (L1). While most of us agree that translating and using L1 all the time in class is not the way to go, if used judiciously, it can give you an advantage. For example, teaching low levels becomes much easier. And so does understanding why and predicting what mistakes students are likely to make. Comparing the two languages can at times help get your head around a difficult grammar

**“nNESTs are role models of successful language learning. In other words, they're a walking proof that what they teach works”**

point, or at least make you aware of what is acceptable in your L1, but is not in English (or vice versa). Comparing languages is also very useful for increasing your awareness of false friends, for example in Polish, German, Spanish, and French the word 'sympathetic' (sympatyczny, sympathisch, simpático and sympathique, respectively) means friendly while in English it doesn't.

nNESTs have a very high language awareness. That is, nNESTs know a lot about the English language, because they learned, rather than acquired it. In a survey of over 300 teachers (Reves and Medgyes, 1994) nNESTs were found to be much more aware of how English worked. In other words, while NESTs have a 6th sense about what 'sounds' right, a nNEST is more likely to tell you why it is right. As a result, nNESTs were shown to be better able to give their students more thorough and relevant explanations of the target language.

With the above 4 strengths I wanted to show that while some nNESTs might - but not necessarily do - have lower language proficiency than a NEST, they can make up for this deficiency with other skills. And let's be honest, teaching a language is much more than just being fluent. As David Crystal - one of the most eminent English linguists - put it in an interview for TEFL Equity Advocates (Kiczowskiak, 2014), "fluency alone is not enough. All sorts of people are fluent, but only a tiny proportion of them are sufficiently aware of the structure of the language that they know how to teach it."

Despite this, over 70% of job advertisements (Selvi, 2010; Kiczowskiak and Beddington, 2014) still place great emphasis on being a Native English Speaker (NES), severely limiting the pool of possible applicants and giving the



Do you have to be born into it to be a good teacher, or are non Native English Speaker Teachers, nNESTs, just as good.

Pic by Adam Jones

impression that only a NES can teach English. What I would like to suggest here is that this situation has a very negative effect on the TEFL industry as a whole.

Firstly, it can lead to tension between NESTs and nNESTs. The former are often unaware of the problem (or its extent), while the latter might blame them for it. Antagonising the two groups reduces the opportunities for honest dialogue and professional development. On the other hand, the best schools I've worked at have always had a healthy mix of NESTs and nNESTs, which allowed us to exchange ideas and learn from each other.

In addition, reducing successful teaching to being a NES severely undermines the value of qualifications, experience and professional development programs. By assuming that we cannot master a language, but have to be born speaking it in order to teach it, it goes against the very essence of education: making progress. I doubt that any of us, whether a NEST or a nNEST, would like to feel that we got the job only because of our first language. It would be degrading. We have all studied very hard to be teachers, and it is time recruitment policies started reflecting this, placing equal value on language proficiency, experience, qualifications and personal traits.

Finally, by looking at all the CVs, rather than only at approximately a fifth (according to Crystal, 2011, non-NES outnumber NES by 5 to 1), the recruiter can ensure that they really are hiring the best possible candidate out there. I would argue that this can have a very positive effect on the quality of teaching in that school, thus increasing the customers' satisfaction. While it might be true that some students will expect to be taught by a NEST, there is substantial evidence that they quickly 'warm up' to nNESTs (Moussu, 2006) and are able to appreciate the different qualities they bring into the classroom (Lipovsky & Mahboob, 2010)

In this article I have argued that since NESTs have important strengths which students can benefit from, the current situation whereby around three-quarters of all jobs are reserved for NESTs only has negative effects on the industry, reducing the value of professionalism and qualifications, as well as perpetuating stereotypes and prejudice. On a personal level, during my teaching career I have worked in six countries and have met some fabulous and rather mediocre teachers in both groups. I have also studied English, German, Spanish, French and Portuguese with NESTs and nNESTs. And one thing that I have learned both as a teacher and a language learner is that your mother tongue is absolutely irrelevant. What counts is the knowledge, the experience, language proficiency and the personal traits that the teacher brings into the classroom.

*This article is based on a blog post titled Non-native English teachers are just as good as natives which was written for Learn English Budapest posted on Nov. 12th, 2014.*

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## What is an ELT Chinwag on metacognition?

by Lizzie Pinard (IH Palermo)

For those not in the know, ELTChinwag discussions, organised by ELT Ireland, take place on Twitter twice a month on Mondays at 20.30pm GMT, under the hashtag #ELTChinwag. The focus is decided in advance and publicised on the hashtag, where you can also make topic suggestions. The topic on the 26th February was Metacognitive Skills. I suggested the topic and had intended to participate, but by the time I got home soon after 9 (Italian time, so in time!) I had clean forgotten about it! On the plus side, I'm participating now by writing up the discussion. Here, then, is a summary of it, expanding the tweet-speak into full sentences, to make it easier to read. The obvious starting point, of course, was to thrash out a definition.

### What do we understand by 'Metacognitive Skills'?

For me, metacognitive skills is the ability to think about how we think about, find out about and remember things (@LahiffP). Knowing what you don't know and how to go about knowing it? (@EAPStephen), and how you might go about being more effective in getting to know it? (@LahiffP). This raised another question.

**Are our students of how they remember and understand, or get to know things? The response to this question, as you would expect, was mixed. Adults tend to be more so than young learners and teenagers – well it depends on the individual.**

Although some adults are totally not either (@KateLloyd05). I think most students are aware of lack of memory but not techniques nor learning style. (@Noreen\_Lam). "I know it doesn't work but not what I might do about it." Can they develop techniques to help though? (@LahiffP). Yes they need suggestions because they may not be aware of methods. Some just think they're not trying hard enough! (@Noreen\_Lam).

Mine are mainly teens and I often ask what they find better when learning and what they don't. Some have insight (@LahiffP). Mine are adults 22-50, only some of them actually want to learn what they could do to learn better, faster (@MihaelaOlariu). Adults, mostly European, and they were reluctant to do weekly reflection but they're getting more into it now (@Jane\_Seely).

**“Everyone has capacity to reflect. Some do it naturally with learning. Others do it in other areas of their life”**

### Further questions and issues were raised and suggestions made...

But do they have the self-awareness that would allow them to regulate that? (@LahiffP). "I know it doesn't work but not what I might do about it." Can they develop techniques to help though? (@LahiffP). Sometimes they are quite pessimistic see English as mainly as content rather than a set of skills. Very few of them are willing to reflect on their learning and observe what they're missing out on (@Noreen\_Lam).

Some educational contexts mean they are not encouraged to reflect (@KateLloyd05). I think everyone has capacity to reflect. Some do it naturally with learning. Others do it in other areas of their life. For example most people would reflect if they erred in social situation. Perhaps a case of helping students transfer existing skills (@EAPStephen). Helpful to try to find other aspects more relevant to them in which they reflect and then extrapolate (@EAPStephen). Yes, they need suggestions because they may not be aware of methods. Some just think they're not trying hard enough! This allusion to the necessity of scaffolding led on very conveniently to the next question.



To join the #eltchinwag all you have to do is search for the hashtag on twitter to see the conversation and the use it in any comments or responses that you want to make.

Pic by Lahiffp

### What can we do to help our students develop their metacognitive skills?

I've noticed that with reflection you have to give them some freedom as to the form and type of feedback (@LahiffP). I designed a questionnaire to appeal to different student learning types, in week 5 now so need to tweak a bit (@Jane\_Seely). In teacher training raising awareness of trainees own learning process is a big part of it (@LahiffP). So important! If teachers themselves aren't aware of their own learning process or haven't developed the skill of reflecting on it, how can they help their learners to develop this?.

Often interesting to get them to reflect on others in class – e.g. find someone who exercise. Who is good at remembering vocab. Then find them and ask them how they do it (@EAPStephen). I love this idea!! Can't wait to try it out! And there was another on the list of new things to try. I like an activity where they give each other study advice, "If I were you I would ..." and do a class study guide (@LahiffP). Expectation management too, given high level topics, students worry about understanding, less about how it's done (@MihaelaOlarlu). Sometimes it is better not to call it a reflection I find, Learner diary is not a great term either (@LahiffP). I wonder what labels do work then?. Recorded presentations, self scoring for writing, reflection on missed items listening skills. They find it beneficial and encouraging, they can cope with mistakes as long as there are reasons (@MihaelaOlarlu). Possibly a Pandoras box. Get them to reflect on the lessons. What activities they enjoyed, found helpful (@EAPStephen). I did a project about learner diaries few years back and v. interesting results with kids and adults (@Noreen\_Lam). I would love to know more about this!. The last question, food for thought to finish on. Of course, anyone who reads my blog will know what my views on this are!

**“Pushing but for their benefit! Giving them tools to learn better”**

### Is it worth pushing students to take part in regulating their own learning?

Absolutely! If you do it consistently over time it rubs off on them (LahiffP). it depends on the type and reason for learning. In EAP is easier to push them, GE in the home country, less so. Just for fun (@KateLloyd05). Definitely, done properly they know it is worth it (@MihaelaOlarlu). Pushing but for their benefit! Giving them tools to learn better and tailor their ideas. Makes it easier and less boring (@Noreen\_Lam). Maybe it's fundamental!! (@ESLBrain)

That wrapped up the ELT Chinwag for another fortnight. How wonderful to see a bunch of teachers being enthusiastic about metacognition and metacognitive skill development. I would love to sit down with them all in a pub and chat about it! In my experience, metacognitive skill development is beneficial and the students do appreciate it. Of course it's not an overnight thing, persistence is key, as is motivation management.

*This article is based on the Summary of the 26.02.2014 #ELTChinwag on Metacognitive Skills in the author's blog Reflections of an English Language Teacher*

### Further Reading

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