

## The Native Speaker in Bilingual Education

When bilingual education was initiated in Montreal in the 1960s (the target language being French) it was expected that teachers in the French immersion programs would themselves be bilingual. It was certainly expected that they would be native speakers of French, the language in which they were to teach English-speaking children. This was not such a difficult condition to meet in a city where plenty of people were bilingual and there was no shortage of people who were native speakers of Canadian French. Unfortunately, bilingual teachers and native speakers of the target language are not as readily available in many other places, including Thailand. Bilingual education in those places has had to depend on either local teachers with some ability in the target language (usually English in Thailand) or expatriate teachers, preferably native speakers of the target language.

There has been considerable discussion in the past ten years or so about the following questions:

- Is the native speaker always the best teacher of the language?
- Are there advantages in employing non-native speakers?
- What are we really looking for in a teacher of English?
- What should we be looking for in an expatriate teacher?

All of these questions are connected, so let us consider them together rather than separately.

Henry Widdowson, the great TESOL scholar, once remarked that, in teaching English, the native speaker possessed “authenticity of language”, but the non-native speaker (when teaching in his own cultural context) had “authenticity of pedagogy”. This means that the native speaker knows his or her language thoroughly, “from the inside”. He has learnt the language at his mother’s knee. His growth as a person cannot be separated from his development in the language of his infancy. But does that mean he can teach the language well? The answer to that depends on other conditions. Is he a trained teacher? Has

he been trained in teaching English to non-native speakers? Has he natural ability for teaching? Does he like to teach? Does he understand the preferred learning styles and values of his students? Does he know anything of the students' language and the difficulties they may have as a result? Does he understand social and managerial expectations in the culture within which he is working? If the answer to all these questions is "yes", that would be wonderful. That teacher would not only have authenticity of language, but authenticity of pedagogy as well. It is unrealistic though to expect that all native speaking English teachers will meet all the above conditions. Schools, therefore, employ the best they can get and, hopefully, at least some of the teachers meet these criteria and stay in Thailand for a long time.

Some native speaking teachers, however, clearly don't meet the criteria at all and one wonders why they are employed. The answer appears to be that parents regard "authenticity of language" as being much more important than "authenticity of pedagogy". They hope that the teacher has enough teaching ability, even though perhaps untrained, perhaps inexperienced and perhaps unsuitable

for other reasons to be a teacher. They seem to believe that the simple fact of hearing an authentic native speaker accent and authentic native oral grammar is more important than knowing how language is learned and how best to teach it. But what about the alternative: to employ Thai teachers who are proficient at English?

There are some very good Thai teachers of English. These teachers not only know the language well, they also know the Thai students well. They know what will help students to learn and they know what kinds of difficulties students are going to have with English. They also understand the values and expectations of Thai culture and they can accept and fit in with the social and managerial culture of a Thai school. So why don't we employ these teachers instead of relying on expatriates? The answer is that there are not enough of them to go around. In fact, there appear to be not many Thai teachers at all who have the ability and the confidence and the desire to teach English. It is especially difficult to find Thai teachers who are able to teach subject content through English, as is required in a bilingual program.

So what do we do? Give up? Of course not, but if we want a growing number of Thai teachers of English to supplement and work co-operatively with capable and diligent foreign teachers in our schools then a lot of money must be spent to train young teachers and to attract good Thai speakers of English to the teaching profession. This cannot be done cheaply. If we want Thai teachers to have authentic language as well as authentic pedagogy, they really need at least one semester of study in an English-speaking country. One year would be better. If we want good speakers of English to leave their companies and come to teach we will need to give them attractive salaries and conditions. However, in the long run it will be cheaper to employ many more Thai teachers of English than we do currently than to continue depending on foreign teachers.

Wouldn't it be good if our children were able to learn English at school from good, carefully selected Thai and foreign teachers, working co-operatively and sharing their knowledge so that students will benefit from the most authentic language and pedagogy available.

Perhaps the next article in this series on bilingual education could discuss the question: Exactly what is a native speaker (and what, therefore, is a "non-native speaker)?)