

What is a Native Speaker?

The Welsh linguist, Alan Davies, once said that people really all have the same native language, and that is *Universal Grammar* (UG). UG is a technical term referring to the innate capacity of all human beings to learn to speak a language. The ability to learn a language is 'hard-wired' into the brain and all people, even those born with a physical disability that prevents them from hearing or perhaps speaking have this ability. UG enables the child to acquire his or her first or 'native' language, often called the 'mother tongue', as the mother is traditionally seen as the first teacher of her children.

It has also been said that "a standard language is a dialect with an army". For example, the standard language of Italy is the Tuscan dialect, something between the dialects of the north and south of Italy. This dialect is what we mean when we speak of the Italian language. It is the official language of Italy. In Thailand, the standard language is Central Thai and this serves as the official language for government, law and education, though many Thais speak dialects from the different regions of Thailand.

So how do we identify a person as a 'native speaker' of a language? Traditionally, we look to the speakers' parents, particularly the mother. If the parents are native speakers of a language, we deem the child to be so as well. Of course, there are exceptions. For example, your mother, originally a native speaker of language X may have moved as a child from one region or country to another where language Y is normally spoken and your mother has become *native-like* in language Y. Indeed she may have lost the ability to speak language X. You may, yourself, have learned language Y at your mother's knee, but now live in a place where language Z is spoken and you have become native-like in that language.

We can see from the above that 'native-ness' in language use is also closely related to *ability*, or language competence. For example, a person who is from a Turkish family, but has been brought up and educated in Germany will probably speak German 'like a native'.

Accent is not an indicator of native-ness or of language competence. Native English speakers from Manchester,

Glasgow, Dublin, Johannesburg, Toronto or Sydney all sound different from each other and all sound different from a native of London, but they are all native speakers of Standard English. Apart from minor differences of vocabulary and idiom, all can speak comfortably together with just occasional difficulty arising from pronunciation differences.

Appearance has nothing whatsoever to do with native-ness or competence in a language. Walk into any school in an Australian or American or British city and you are likely to see children of European, East or South Asian, Hispanic, Indigenous, African, Middle Eastern or Polynesian backgrounds, all of whom speak English equally well or, if immigrants, will do so after more time in that country. That is why we see at bilingual and other schools foreign teachers of English who themselves are of perhaps Asian, Polynesian, European, African or any of the other possible backgrounds resulting from either migration of people to English-speaking countries or the migration of English to countries outside its homelands.

In our school, we ask that foreign teachers be native-speakers or 'near-native speakers' of English. That is because native speakers of the language who are also qualified, experienced teachers are not always available. Hence, we look for non-native speakers who are proven as teachers and whose English is native-like. These teachers are often from the European continental nations, African countries and the Philippines and they are asked to teach subjects such as Maths, Science, PE and Music. The single most prominent country of origin is the Philippines, partly because they are available, they are qualified and competent teachers and, at our school, they are sought after as teachers of Music, a highly developed curriculum area at the school.

Non-native speakers of English who are very competent in the language and are good teachers play an important role in bilingual education in Thailand. As was stated in an earlier article in *Metro Life*, they have a clearer understanding of the experience of learning a second language than does a monolingual native English speaker. They are therefore, perhaps more likely to have *authenticity of pedagogy* than a monolingual English

speaker. They know what it is like to learn in a classroom through a language other than one's own. Of course, a native speaker who has experienced learning another language, whether it be Thai or any language, may also attain authentic pedagogy in addition to his/her native authenticity of language. Such a teacher we need to retain in this country.

At the beginning of this article it was stated that we all have the capacity to learn a language and that this capacity consists of a hardwired mental platform of universal grammatical forms on which a native language is built. The distinguishing feature, therefore, between a native speaker and a non-native speaker who is very good at the language is not so much linguistic as cultural. The native speaker knows the language *from the inside*. He/she has learnt it in a completely natural cultural and social context. Every nuance, every movement, every expression, every change of tone is linguistically meaningful because the native speaker knows the cultural context exactly. That is why the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages acknowledges that *Pragmatics* (the indication of intention through indirect or

subtle forms of language) is the hardest thing for non-native speakers to learn. For reasons such as this we need native speakers as teachers and models for our children. However, as models of how language can be learned, adapted and used as a second language we also benefit greatly from competent teachers who are also competent non-native speakers of English.