

IJC ELT

Volume 1
March 2014

International Journal of Christianity & English Language Teaching

A refereed, online journal on Christianity and ELT



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The *IJC&ELT* is also supported by the Department of Applied Linguistics and TESOL in the Cook School of Intercultural Studies at Biola University in La Mirada, California. Visit <http://cook.biola.edu/programs/linguistics-tesol/> for more information. The *IJC&ELT* gratefully acknowledges this support.

The *IJC&ELT* acronym logo and cover page title were designed by Daniel McClary (dmclary@immerse-us.com), of Immerse International, on behalf of CELEA. This service to both CELEA and the *IJC&ELT* is much appreciated.



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International Journal of Christianity and English Language Teaching

Volume 1 (March 2014)

edited by Michael Lessard-Clouston & Xuesong (Andy) Gao

The editors extend their appreciation to all the referees who volunteered their time and expertise in reading, interacting with, and evaluating the manuscripts they received.

Typeset in Times New Roman

ISSN 2334-1866 (online)

Nonnative English-speaking Teachers' Self-perceived Language Proficiency Levels, Anxieties, and Learning Strategies

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Abstract

Research suggests that nonnative English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) suffer anxiety because of their self-perceived inadequate language ability. This paper reports on an online survey of 63 NNESTs and teacher trainees in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings that investigated the participants' perceived language abilities and their approaches to anxiety and language learning. The results reveal that more than half of the participants were content with their overall language abilities although their levels of contentment varied with distinct skills. The survey results also indicate a complex relationship between NNESTs' perceived language proficiency levels and their anxiety about teaching English. Additionally, the survey also documented the participants' anxiety management methods, language learning strategies, and language learning beliefs. Reflecting on the results, I propose a Christian approach to NNEST issues in terms of self-perception, professional development, and the roles of Christian teacher trainers and colleagues.

Key words: NNESTs, anxiety, ESL/EFL, proficiency, learning strategies

Introduction

This research resulted from my struggle as an NNEST trainee in graduate school in the United States. Prior to my graduate studies, I had worked with American missionaries in Japan to reach out to Japanese non-Christians through an English-teaching ministry. As I taught English there, I began to realize that I needed professional training and applied for an American graduate program in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Once I started my graduate studies, I suffered a sense of inferiority to my native English-speaking peers. Compared to them, I was far short of fluency and accuracy in using English, and therefore began to doubt whether I was qualified to be an English teacher. For this reason, I conducted the present research to seek a way out of my frustration.

It seems that the sense of inferiority to native speakers in terms of language proficiency is not unusual for NNESTs. For example, Brinton (2004) reports on NNEST trainees' reflective descriptions of their practicum experiences in the U.S. and reveals how the trainees were challenged in class because of their insufficient language knowledge and language skills as

well as how those experiences made them feel inadequate about being English teachers. NNESTs' perceptions about their language proficiency seem to affect not only pre-service but also experienced NNESTs. In the analysis of his survey on Brazilian NNESTs, Rajagopalan (2005) points out that NNESTs' self-perceived language ability, rather than their actual ability to use English, plays a major role in determining their confidence to teach. Medgyes (1999b), an NNEST himself, also asserts that NNESTs incessantly suffer from the "feeling of underachievement" (p. 15) as they compare themselves with native speakers, especially with those who have similar personal and professional backgrounds as theirs.

Regarding the term *native speaker*, researchers have not reached an agreement on the definition (McKay, 2002), and, accordingly, the distinction between native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and NNESTs has been debated among researchers (Kamhi-Stein, 2014). However, *native speaker* is widely used by most people to refer to a model language user for language learners. This popular belief, which is likely to have been instilled in NNESTs, seems to be well captured in the definition of the term by Richards and Schmidt (2010, p. 386):

A person who learns a language as a child and continues to use it fluently as a dominant language. Native speakers are said to use a language grammatically, fluently and appropriately, to identify with a community where it is spoken, and to have clear intuitions about what is considered grammatical or ungrammatical in the language.

Researchers have associated NNESTs' negative self-perception as English teachers with their awareness of an insurmountable gap between their knowledge of English and native English speakers'. Rajagopalan (2005), for example, argues that, although there is no such person in the real world who possesses all the characteristics of the ideal native speaker, many nonnative English-teaching professionals seem to fail to realize this and experience a crisis of confidence in teaching. Rajagopalan (2005) also argues that "the very idea that [NNESTs] can never be equal to their [native speaker] colleagues often makes them enter into a spirit of conformity or even defeatism" (p. 293). Likewise, Medgyes (1999b), asserting that "[NNESTs] are less proficient users of English than NESTs" and that for NNESTs "to achieve native-like proficiency is wishful thinking" (p. 31), points out that the sense of inferiority to native speakers discourages NNESTs and puts them under constant stress as they teach English.

As for NNESTs' self-perception of language ability, there have been some research (Reves & Medgyes, 1994) and exhortations for NNESTs to strive for higher language

proficiency levels (Braine, 2010; Llurda, 2005; Reves & Medgyes, 1994; Snow, 2007). Also, researchers have proposed language-improvement strategies for NNESTs (Braine, 2010; Nemtchinova, Mahboob, Eslami, & Dogancay-Aktuna, 2010; Snow, 2007). Taking previous research into consideration, the present research was conducted to investigate the reality of NNESTs' self-perceived language proficiency levels, their anxiety management practices, and their strategies for improving their language proficiency levels. The study addressed the following research questions:

- RQ 1. How do NNESTs perceive their language proficiency levels?
- RQ 2. How do they manage anxiety about teaching English?
- RQ 3. What have they done or are they doing to improve their language proficiency levels?

Method

Instrument

The research was conducted using a questionnaire (see the Appendix). The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions on participants' first languages, nationality, gender, age, educational background, and professional experiences/contexts, followed by three questions on self-perception of language proficiency levels, five questions on anxiety about teaching English and coping strategies, and three questions on language-improvement strategies. The questionnaire was created using online survey software provided by SurveyMonkey™.

Data-Collection Procedure

The URL of the questionnaire was distributed via email to six current and former NNEST trainees in the MA TESOL program at a university in the U.S. and to members of the e-list of the NNEST Interest Section in the international Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) association. Additionally, the URL was also distributed by a member of the e-list to an unknown number of her students in the program for teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) at a federal university in Brazil.

Seventy-two teachers and teacher trainees responded to the survey, but the final number of participants to be analyzed was reduced to 63. Of the initial 72 respondents, eight respondents reported that their first or primary language was English. These respondents might be native-like NNESTs who emigrated from non-English-speaking countries in their childhood

(Hansen, 2004), but they were excluded from the data because the reasons for their responses were unknown. Additionally, one person who provided only his or her nationality and first language was not included with the participants.

The responses of the participants were obtained from SurveyMonkey™ in Microsoft Excel® file format for analysis.

Participants

The 63 participants varied in terms of their first languages, nationalities, and ages. Portuguese-speaking Brazilians formed the largest group ($n=33$), followed by Spanish speakers from Latin American countries ($n=10$), Korean speakers from South Korea ($n=7$), Mandarin Chinese speakers from mainland China and Taiwan ($n=4$), Japanese speakers from Japan ($n=2$), Russian speakers from Russia ($n=2$), speakers of other Asian languages from Southeast Asia and Western Asia ($n=3$), and speakers of other European languages from Africa and Central America ($n=2$). Fifty-eight participants (92.1%) were in their 20s to 40s, and the clear majority were female ($n=56$).

Forty-seven participants (74.6%) were educated at English-medium institutions at various levels between kindergarten and graduate school, for an average period of 4.0 years. Twenty-four participants (38.1%) had English-medium education only at the post-secondary level, and 13 participants (20.6%) had both secondary and post-secondary education in English. Ten participants (15.9%) had English-medium education only at the secondary level. Since the survey did not ask the participants where their schools were located, it was unclear whether the participants received English-medium education in their own countries or English-speaking countries.

As for the length of the participants' English learning as a second/foreign language, no reliable data were obtained because some participants seemed to interpret "English as a subject" in Question 5 as English as a mainstream school subject while others interpreted it as English as a second/foreign language.

The participants' teaching experiences and contexts varied. The largest group was of those who had taught for more than 10 years ($n=16$), followed by those with 3-5 years of experience ($n=13$), those with 1-2 years of experience ($n=12$), and those still in training ($n=10$). The participants' target teaching levels ranged from beginning to advanced, but the levels and

types of their schools (e.g., primary, secondary, tertiary, private, public) were unknown. As for their teaching environments, 45 participants (71.4 %) were in EFL contexts.

Results

Participants' Self-Perceived Language Proficiency Levels

Questions 11 through 13 of the questionnaire probed the participants' views of their overall and specific language abilities and their awareness of differences between themselves and native English speakers. The data revealed that 42 participants (66.6%) were content with their overall language proficiency levels (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Participant Contentment with Their Overall Language Proficiency*

| Contentment | <i>n</i> | Percentage (<i>n</i> =63) |
|----------------|----------|----------------------------|
| Absolutely yes | 14 | 22.2 |
| Yes | 28 | 44.4 |
| No | 18 | 28.6 |
| Absolutely not | 3 | 4.8 |

While the majority of the participants perceived their overall proficiency levels positively, their contentment with various skills differed (see Table 2). According to the responses to Question 12, most participants were positive about their ability in reading (90.5%) and listening (81.0%). As for grammar, pronunciation, and writing, more than 70% of the participants had positive self-perception. The skill that the participants were least positive about was vocabulary (57.1%), followed by pragmatics (69.8%) and speaking (69.8%).

Table 2. *Participant Positive Self-Perception of Each Skill*

| Skills | Positive responses (<i>n</i>) | Percentage (<i>n</i> =63) |
|---------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Reading | 57 | 90.5 |
| Listening | 51 | 81.0 |
| Grammar | 50 | 79.4 |
| Pronunciation | 48 | 76.2 |
| Writing | 47 | 74.6 |
| Pragmatics | 44 | 69.8 |
| Speaking | 44 | 69.8 |
| Vocabulary | 36 | 57.1 |

Question 13 asked the participants about the frequency of their comparison between themselves and native speakers in terms of language proficiency. In the question, I used the term *native speakers* with the definition cited above by Richards and Schmidt (2010) in mind, but I did not present the definition in the questionnaire. Forty participants (63.5%) answered that they always or usually compared their proficiency levels with native speakers', while only two participants (3.2%) answered they never compared themselves with native speakers (see Table 3). Interestingly, of the 40 participants who frequently compared themselves with native speakers, 25 participants were content with their overall proficiency.

Table 3. *Participants' Comparison Between Themselves and Native Speakers*

| <u>Frequency</u> | <u>n</u> | <u>Percentage (n=63)</u> |
|------------------|----------|--------------------------|
| Always | 16 | 25.4 |
| Usually | 24 | 38.1 |
| Sometimes | 14 | 22.2 |
| Occasionally | 7 | 11.1 |
| Never | 2 | 3.2 |

Participants' Anxiety About Teaching English

Questions 14 and 15 examined the participants' anxiety about teaching English because of their language proficiency levels and the causes to which they ascribed their anxiety. According to the findings of Question 14, 31 participants (49.2%) acknowledged that they were anxious about teaching English because of their self-perceived language proficiency levels (see Table 4.1). In Question 15, the respondents to Question 14 were asked about the potential causes of their anxiety, and they pointed to *correcting student errors*, *handling student questions*, and *answering culture-related questions* as the major causes (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.1 *Participants' Anxiety in Relation to Self-Perceived Language Proficiency Levels*

| <u>Responses</u> | <u>n</u> | <u>Percentage (n=63)</u> |
|------------------|----------|--------------------------|
| Absolutely yes | 8 | 12.7 |
| Yes | 23 | 36.5 |
| No | 20 | 31.7 |
| Absolutely not | 12 | 19.1 |

Table 4.2 *Anxiety-Inducing Activities*

| <u>Activities</u> | <u>n*</u> | <u>Percentage (n=31)</u> |
|--|-----------|--------------------------|
| Correcting student errors | 17 | 54.8 |
| Answering student questions | 15 | 48.4 |
| Answering culture-related questions | 13 | 41.9 |
| Giving feedback on pronunciation | 10 | 32.3 |
| Teaching communicative activities | 9 | 29.0 |
| <u>Giving instructions to students</u> | <u>8</u> | <u>25.8</u> |

* Multiple answers were allowed.

Question 15 also provided the respondents with an open-ended option to allow them to add and address other causes of anxiety. The respondents' answers indicated that, in addition to the activities given in the multiple-choice question, the following factors were perceived to cause them anxiety:

- Lack of fluency in speaking (*n*=2)
- Insufficient lexical knowledge (*n*=2)
- Insufficient grammar knowledge or grammar instruction skills (*n*=2)
- Lack of accuracy in speaking (*n*=1)
- Lack of language instinct (*n*=1)

Question 16 asked the relevant participants (who answered “yes” to Question 14) about their strategies for coping with anxiety. Twenty-six of the 31 respondents described how they managed anxiety, and their strategies were classified into six categories (see Table 5). Some respondents used more than one anxiety management strategy. The most popular strategy among the respondents was thorough preparation for classes.

Table 5. *Coping Strategies*

| <u>Strategies</u> | <u>n*</u> | <u>Percentage (n=31)</u> |
|--|-----------|--------------------------|
| Preparing well before class | 12 | 38.7 |
| Improving language ability | 5 | 16.1 |
| Acknowledging limitations/strengths | 5 | 16.1 |
| Learning from native/proficient speakers | 3 | 9.7 |
| Making a mental effort to stay calm | 3 | 9.7 |
| <u>Avoiding particular activities</u> | <u>2</u> | <u>6.5</u> |

* Multiple answers were allowed.

Questions 17 and 18 asked the relevant respondents whether they had discussed their anxieties with someone and, if they had, whom they consulted. The results showed that 27 respondents had talked to other people about their teaching anxiety, particularly colleagues or teacher trainers rather than their families or employers (see Table 6).

Table 6. *Choices of Consultants*

| Consultants | <i>n</i> * |
|---|------------|
| Nonnative English-speaking peers/colleagues | 16 |
| Native English-speaking peers/colleagues | 15 |
| Professors | 14 |
| Family | 10 |
| Employers | 2 |

* Multiple answers were allowed.

Participants' Language Learning Strategies

According to the results of Questions 19 and 20, 55 participants (87.3%) had done or were doing something to improve their language skills, and 31 of these 55 participants used more than one strategy. The strategies were categorized according to their target skills, and the number of participants who had used or were using each strategy is provided in Tables 7.1 and 7.2.

Table 7.1 *Language Learning Strategies: The Four Language Skills*

| Target skills and strategies | Users (<i>n</i>) | Percentage (<i>n</i> =55) |
|---|--------------------|----------------------------|
| Speaking | 21 | 38.2 |
| Speaking to English speakers (native/nonnative) | 16 | 29.1 |
| Reading out loud/speaking to oneself | 3 | 5.5 |
| Giving presentations | 2 | 3.6 |
| <u>Reading novels, newspapers, etc.</u> | 20 | 36.4 |
| Listening | 19 | 34.5 |
| Watching videos, TV programs, etc. | 14 | 25.4 |
| Listening to the radio, music, etc. | 5 | 9.1 |
| <u>Writing blogs, articles, etc.</u> | 5 | 9.1 |

As the data above show, the participants had used or were using a wide variety of strategies for developing the four language skills (i.e., reading, listening, speaking, and writing), subskills (i.e., grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation), and integrated skills. No strategy for improving

Table 7.2 *Language Learning Strategies: Subskills, Integrated Skills, and Others*

| Target skills and strategies | Users (<i>n</i>) | Percentage (<i>n</i> =55) |
|---|--------------------|----------------------------|
| Pronunciation | 3 | 5.5 |
| Grammar/vocabulary | | |
| Studying grammar | 5 | 9.1 |
| Studying vocabulary | 3 | 5.5 |
| Doing exercises using textbooks/ websites | 1 | 1.8 |
| Asking native speakers for error correction | 1 | 1.8 |
| Integrated skills | | |
| Preparing for/taking proficiency tests | 10 | 18.2 |
| Studying in school (e.g., graduate school) | 8 | 14.5 |
| Studying/living overseas | 3 | 5.5 |
| Attending conferences | 2 | 3.6 |
| Getting involved in a professional organization | 1 | 1.8 |
| Other | | |
| Studying translation | 1 | 1.8 |

pragmatic skills was included in the responses. Among all the participants' strategies, activities for enhancing speaking, reading, and listening skills were more popular than the other activities (see Tables 7.1 and 7.2). Regarding the integrated skills, studying for proficiency tests was the most popular activity, followed by studying English in educational institutions, such as graduate schools (see Table 7.2).

It is noteworthy that some of the participants' responses showed their dependence on native speakers as language-improving resources: as conversation partners (*n*=7); as model writers (*n*=2); as a pronunciation coach (*n*=1); as a writing coach (*n*=1); and as an advisor on the English language in general (*n*=1).

Question 21 asked the participants what kind of language learning strategy they found most effective for improving their language proficiency levels, and 58 participants (92.1%) provided responses to this question (see Tables 8.1 and 8.2). Contrary to the results of Question 20, reading, writing, and studying for proficiency tests were not highly regarded as influential factors for the participants' language improvement. On the other hand, more participants found speaking and listening activities to be helpful in improving their proficiency in English. As for integrated skills, immersion in English-speaking environments at home, at work, and in school (e.g., graduate school) was regarded as the most influential language-improvement factor by the participants. In addition to the strategies and activities directly related to language skills improvement, some participants mentioned their engagement in their profession (i.e., teaching

English) and attitudes toward language learning (e.g., motivation, persistence) as contributing factors to their English language improvement.

Table 8.1 *Most Influential Factors in Participants' Language Ability Improvement: The Four Language Skills*

| Target skills and influential factors | Responses (<i>n</i>) | Percentage (<i>n</i> =58) |
|--|------------------------|----------------------------|
| Speaking | 19 | 32.7 |
| Speaking to English speakers (native/nonnative) | 17 | 29.3 |
| Taking conversation classes/lessons | 2 | 3.4 |
| Reading novels, newspapers, etc. | 8 | 13.8 |
| Listening | 18 | 30.9 |
| Watching videos, TV programs, etc. | 14 | 24.1 |
| Listening to English speakers (native/nonnative) | 2 | 3.4 |
| Listening to the radio, music, etc. | 2 | 3.4 |
| Writing constantly | 1 | 1.7 |

Table 8.2 *Most Influential Factors in Participants' Language Ability Improvement: Subskills, Integrated Skills, and Other*

| Target skills and influential factors | Responses (<i>n</i>) | Percentage (<i>n</i> =58) |
|---|------------------------|----------------------------|
| Pronunciation | | |
| Practicing pronunciation | 1 | 1.7 |
| Watching TV shows/sitcoms | 1 | 1.7 |
| Grammar/vocabulary | | |
| Watching TV shows/sitcoms | 3 | 5.2 |
| Studying vocabulary | 1 | 1.7 |
| Applying grammar knowledge to daily communication | 1 | 1.7 |
| Integrated skills | | |
| Being immersed in English-speaking environments | 9 | 15.5 |
| Studying in school (e.g., graduate school) | 4 | 6.9 |
| Preparing for/taking proficiency tests | 1 | 1.7 |
| Doing daily activities in English | 1 | 1.7 |
| Participating in projects, conferences, etc. | 1 | 1.7 |
| Other | | |
| Motivation/persistence | 8 | 13.8 |
| Teaching English | 7 | 12.1 |
| Using the Internet | 3 | 5.2 |
| Discussing linguistic issues with peers | 2 | 3.4 |
| Working on weaknesses | 1 | 1.7 |
| Singing songs | 1 | 1.7 |
| Thinking in English | 1 | 1.7 |
| Self-studying | 1 | 1.7 |

Discussion

RQ 1. How do NNESTs perceive their language proficiency levels?

This survey revealed that, although their self-perceived proficiency levels varied among different skills, the majority of the participants were content with their ability to use English. Although it is difficult to pinpoint all the contributing factors, the participants' experiences in English-medium education and their cultural backgrounds may be among those contributing to their positive self-perceptions. For example, of eight participants who had English-medium education only at the undergraduate/graduate levels, five participants (62.5%) responded that they were not content with their overall language proficiency levels. On the other hand, all the seven respondents who had English-medium education at both the secondary and tertiary levels were positive about their overall language abilities. As for the possible influence of cultural differences on the participants' self-perception, a comparison between the Brazilian respondents and the Korean and Chinese respondents showed an interesting contrast. While 23 of 33 Brazilians (69.7%) were positive about their overall language ability, only four of 10 Koreans and Chinese (40.0%) had positive views of their language proficiency levels. In her research on cultural differences and learner anxiety, Lim (2009) has revealed that Koreans and Chinese are more likely to suffer anxiety in learning English because of various factors including the fear of failure leading to losing face, and the respondents with Korean and Chinese backgrounds in the present research seem to indicate this tendency, although the number of the participants was small. Further research is needed to examine the correlations among various factors, including those mentioned above, to determine what contributes to NNESTs' positive self-perceived language proficiency levels.

As for separate language skills, the survey revealed that a majority of the participants were highly content with their reading/listening skills. One contributing factor to this result may be the availability of materials and opportunities for improving these skills. Unlike speaking, which usually calls for an interlocutor, reading and listening can be done individually, regardless of time or location. Furthermore, technology, such as the Internet, has made authentic listening/reading materials more readily available than previously. In fact, some of the participants in the present research commented on the Internet as the most effective tool for language improvement.

Unlike their reading/listening skills, the participants were least content with their vocabulary, which is understandable, considering the vastness of the English lexicon and the multi-faceted nature of vocabulary. Crystal (2003) compares two major English dictionaries and estimates that “their combined lexicon would exceed three-quarters of a million” words (p. 119). Crystal (2003) also points out lexical items which are not always included in dictionaries, such as expressions in local dialects, slang words, abbreviations, and scientific terms, and argues that “it is difficult to see how even a conservative estimate of English vocabulary could go much below a million lexemes” (p. 119). In addition to the enormity of English vocabulary, the multiple elements of each lexical item lay a burden on learners, including NNESTs. Zimmerman (2009) explains that the knowledge of a word consists of many “layers” (p. 5), such as meaning, grammatical forms, and appropriateness, and that learning them is a gradual, long-term process. Thus, the mastery of the English vocabulary poses a challenge to all learners of English, regardless of their native-speaker/nonnative-speaker status. However, the endeavor is even more challenging to nonnative English speakers, especially NNESTs. NNESTs’ insufficient lexical knowledge is often challenged by students and is thus detrimental to their credibility and self-confidence as teachers (Medgyes, 1999a). In fact, that is what I have experienced as an EFL teacher in Japan, where students often expect teachers to know everything about the English language. Therefore, teacher training focused on vocabulary improvement, such as an intensive vocabulary instruction course for teacher trainees (Medgyes, 1999a) and a daily-life vocabulary course utilizing children’s stories (Dabars & Kagan, 2002), might help NNESTs enhance their self-perception of language abilities.

Following vocabulary, speaking and pragmatics were the skills the participants were least content with. While one third of the participants ($n=21$) answered that they had done or were doing activities for improving their speaking skills, no one mentioned any learning strategies for learning pragmatics. It is pointed out that, with poor pragmatic knowledge, language learners are prone to “the devastating effect of [their] grammatically correct, yet situationally inappropriate spoken or written communication” (Tatsuki & Houck, 2010, p. 1). NNESTs are no exception. In order for them to enhance their self-perceived language abilities, therefore, it is necessary for NNESTs to increase not only grammatical/lexical knowledge but also pragmatic knowledge. Additionally, the discrepancy between the participants’ awareness of their insufficient pragmatic knowledge and their apparent lack of strategies for dealing with

the problem seems to indicate that training in pragmatics and learning strategies could help NNESTs greatly.

In the questionnaire, I asked NNESTs how often they compared their proficiency levels with native speakers', assuming that, based on the literature review above (Medgyes, 1999b; Rajagopalan, 2005), NNESTs who frequently compared themselves with native speakers would not be content with their language ability. However, the research revealed that 62.5% of the 40 participants who frequently made comparisons between themselves and native speakers were positive about their overall language proficiency levels. This unexpected result could be due to my failure to present the definition of the term *native speakers* for the present research. As I mentioned earlier, I used the term for model speakers of English, as is often the case in popular conversation. However, in reality, there are differences among so-called native speakers regarding language proficiency levels, and it could be that some participants with high proficiency levels compared themselves with native speakers with lower proficiency levels and gained confidence in their language ability. Thus, my initial assumption about NNESTs' frequent comparison with native speakers and their discontentment with their language proficiency levels was not confirmed.

RQ 2. How do NNESTs manage anxiety about teaching English?

The literature review above (Medgyes, 1999b; Rajagopalan, 2005) suggests that NNESTs who are not content with their language ability are perhaps more prone to anxiety about teaching English than those who are content. However, the survey has indicated that this argument may not always apply to all NNESTs. For example, five of the 21 respondents who were discontent with their language abilities answered that they were not anxious about teaching English. On the other hand, 15 respondents who were content with their proficiency levels still expressed anxiety because of their language abilities. These apparently contradictory results suggest a complex relationship between NNESTs' self-perceived language proficiency levels and their potential anxiety about teaching English. To elucidate the relationship, further research is needed.

Many of the participants who were anxious about teaching English chose correcting student errors and answering student questions as the activities they were anxious about, which can be accounted for by their sense of insecurity or the unpredictability of questions. Correcting

errors puts teachers' language ability to the test, thus causing the teachers to feel insecure; answering questions may cause anxiety because it is impossible to perfectly predict what questions will be asked and to be prepared for them. Those two factors may affect all teachers no matter how proficient they may be in English, regardless of their native/nonnative status.

As for anxiety management strategies, more respondents ($n=12$) mentioned well-preparedness for classes as their coping strategy than those who referred to improving their language proficiency levels ($n=5$) (see Table 5). This result does not necessarily indicate the respondents' lack of concern about improving their language ability, but it seems that the respondents may be more focused on managing anxiety about teaching particular groups of students on a daily basis than on improving their language proficiency levels in general.

Several respondents with teaching anxiety adopted what could be called "strategies of acknowledgement." They acknowledged both their limitations and strengths as nonnative speakers and attempted to capitalize on seeing themselves as whole persons. Considering the impossibility of predicting all the questions from students and preparing for everything, a strategy like this may also play a key role for NNESTs to manage teaching anxiety.

The survey also revealed that the respondents consulted other people about their anxieties, especially those who were engaged in the same profession. Considering this result, further research on the effect of peer/mentor consultation and its methodologies would be beneficial not only to NNESTs who seek encouragement and advice but also to those who are willing to help NNESTs with anxiety.

RQ 3. What have NNESTs done or are they doing to improve their language proficiency levels?

This survey revealed the participants' adoption of a wide range of language learning strategies and their earnest efforts to improve their language skills. Of all their responses, strategies for speaking/listening skills were prominent as popular and effective strategies for language ability development. That seems to be reasonable, considering the fact that speaking, or oral communication, was one of the skills the participants were not very content with.

One point to note is the native speaker's role as a language resource and language partner for NNESTs. Some participants acknowledged the positive effect of interacting with native English-speaking friends and colleagues on improving their language ability.

Researchers have also acknowledged the benefits of interactions between NESTs and NNESTs

as effective strategies for enhancing NNESTs' language proficiency levels and intercultural knowledge (Dormer, 2010; Wu, Liang, & Csepelyi, 2010). Therefore, NNESTs should be aware of the benefits of cooperation with NESTs and seek opportunities to interact.

Reflecting on the Present Research as a Christian NNEST

This survey seems to indicate that many NNESTs believe in earnest self-effort as the key to success in achieving higher language proficiency levels and managing teaching anxiety. However, this approach may not always be effective in eliminating NNESTs' anxiety about teaching English. Pursuing and depending on success for a feeling of self-worth as teachers could entangle NNESTs in persistent fear of failure and rejection (Liang, 2009).

It may be true that the root cause of NNESTs' anxiety, related to their self-perceived language disability, is not necessarily their language ability per se but their negative self-perception itself (Kamhi-Stein, 2014). Some people might say that anxiety about teaching English can even be found among NESTs. However, I suspect that an inferiority complex about language proficiency levels is unique to NNESTs and that it is hard for those who suffer from the complex to break the bondage to it.

Facing these dilemmas, NNESTs whose self-perceived language ability falls short of that of native English-speaking colleagues may wonder whether they will ever be set free from this indelible sense of inadequacy. In fact, since I started to pursue a career in teaching English, I have been tormented by this sense of hopelessness. However, there is hope for those of us who are in Christ Jesus. He has made us righteous and perfect in God's sight because of His death on the cross for our sins and His resurrection from the dead. He has also made us worthy because *He* is worthy. As the Apostle Paul states, "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39, NIV), and we can add to that list our self-perceived language proficiency levels and our sense of inadequacy. Therefore, before devoting our time to professional development, including language skills improvement and anxiety management, we Christian NNESTs should dig deeper than the surface level of self-effort and lay the foundation of our confidence on Christ Jesus the Rock. On this Rock alone can we firmly stand when our language ability is challenged.

Some participants with teaching anxiety due to their language proficiency levels responded that acknowledging their limitations helped them deal with anxiety. This power of acknowledging weaknesses is also found in the Bible. The Lord Himself says that “[His] power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). Therefore, we Christian NNESTs can rejoice even if we regarded ourselves, or were regarded by others, as weaker in our language ability than native English speakers. We can joyfully and confidently say, “Lord, we have been purchased with Your blood, and we are Yours. For Your glory, use all that we are and all that we have, even our weaknesses.” This total, faithful surrender to Christ will set us free from the bondage of a sense of inadequacy. Therefore, let us rejoice and praise the Lord for our weaknesses.

In the survey, the participants with anxiety about teaching English also reported that acknowledging their unique strengths as nonnative English speakers helped them cope with anxiety. This strategy is similar to the biblical principle of diversity in the body of Christ. The Apostle Paul says that “those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable” (1 Cor. 12:22). He also states that God has brought all the different parts of the body with different strengths and weaknesses together as one body (1 Cor. 12:24-25). Compared to NESTs, NNESTs may be weaker when it comes to language skills, but they may be stronger in other teaching skills, such as understanding students’ needs and explaining the structures of the English language, because of their own experiences as English learners (Medgyes, 2001). As indispensable parts of the body of Christian English teachers, NNESTs should be aware of their unique strengths and capitalize on them.

That being said, I would like to encourage my fellow Christian NNESTs and myself to do our best in our professional development, including language skills improvement, for we are serving Christ Jesus our Lord (Col. 3:23-24). As for NNESTs’ devotion to language ability development, researchers emphasize it as language-teaching professionals’ responsibility (Braine, 2010; Medgyes, 1999a). As servants of God, I would suggest we take this responsibility even more seriously than others in the field of English language teaching, being obedient and faithful to His calling and the gifts He has entrusted to us for teaching English.

Suggestions for Christian Teacher Trainers and Christian Colleagues of NNESTs

This survey indicates that NNESTs and NNEST trainees with anxiety are likely to ask their trainers and colleagues for advice and encouragement. Therefore, it is necessary for

Christian teacher trainers and Christian colleagues to be aware of the issues that their nonnative English-speaking teacher trainees and colleagues deal with, to pray for them, to be ready to provide them with practical advice and help, and to work side by side with them. In my case, for example, my professors in graduate school helped me when I lost confidence in teaching English because of my insufficient language ability compared to my proficient English-speaking classmates. One of the professors helped me become aware of the strengths I had and demonstrated how they could be used to help ESL students learn English. Another professor helped me find a tutor so that I would be able to practice speaking English. The other professor, who was an NNEST himself, introduced me to literature on various NNEST issues to encourage me. Best of all, they all prayed for me every time I visited their offices. Without their faithful and prayerful support, I could not have completed my graduate studies to be an effective English teacher.

Interaction and collaboration between NESTs and NNESTs in and outside the classroom complement each other's strengths and weaknesses, and various collaborative activities (e.g., language exchange programs and material design) enhance not only NNESTs' language skills but also their awareness of the unique strengths they have, which benefit NESTs in their workplaces (Dormer, 2010). In my present workplace in Japan, for example, NESTs on the staff ask me for effective methods for explaining grammar to Japanese students and refer their students with grammatical questions to me, while I ask the NESTs lexical and pragmatic questions raised by my students. In the process, I have become more aware of my strengths and more appreciative of being an NNEST.

Thus, I would like to suggest that Christian teacher trainers and Christian NESTs prayerfully encourage and support NNESTs who suffer from teaching anxiety caused by their negative self-perceived language proficiency levels so that they would be able to achieve their full potential as English language teachers.

Conclusion

This survey was conducted to describe NNESTs' self-perceived language proficiency levels, anxiety management, and language improvement strategies. The results revealed that more than half of the participants were content with their overall language abilities although their levels of contentment varied with different skills. As for the participants' teaching anxiety,

this survey has suggested that NNESTs' self-perceived language proficiency levels may not necessarily be related to their anxiety about teaching English, which calls for further research on the causes of NNESTs' teaching anxiety. The survey has also shown that NNESTs with anxiety due to their insufficient language abilities adopt various strategies to cope with anxiety. As for language-improvement strategies, this survey described the participants' adoption of a wide variety of methods.

In light of the results of this present research, I have discussed a Christian approach to NNEST issues in terms of self-perception, professional development, and cooperation with NESTs. For us Christian NNESTs, Christ Jesus is the foundation of our self-worth, and He is strong in our weaknesses. We are also given unique strengths, which benefit English language teaching as a whole. Acknowledging those points, we can devote ourselves to language ability development as a part of our service to Christ Jesus. Additionally, I have suggested Christian teacher trainers' prayerful and practical support of NNEST trainees and Christian NESTs' collaboration with NNESTs.

Since this research was focused on describing the participants' self-perception of language proficiency levels, anxiety, and language skills development, no in-depth analysis was conducted of correlations among variables that may have influenced the participants' responses. Furthermore, one particular participant group with the same linguistic and cultural background was far larger than the other groups, and that has affected the survey results. These limitations merely highlight the need for further research, however. To investigate NNESTs' self-perceived realities regarding their language abilities and the issues of anxiety that arise from their self-perceptions of language proficiency levels, further research on NNESTs across a wider range of sociocultural and professional backgrounds is needed.

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Appendix: The Survey Questionnaire

1. Nationality:
2. First or dominant language:
3. Gender Male Female
4. Age 20s 30s 40s 50s 60 and older
5. How many years have you studied English as a subject? years
6. Have you studied at an English-medium educational institution? Yes No
7. If yes, for how long and at what levels? years
 kindergarten elementary junior high high school undergraduate grad school
8. How many years have you been teaching?
a. Still in training b. 1-2 years c. 3-5 years d. 6-10 years e. More than 10 years
f. None of the above (please explain _____)
9. What is your teaching level?
 beginners intermediate advanced other (_____)
10. What is your teaching environment? ESL EFL
11. Are you content with your overall proficiency in English?
 Absolutely yes Yes No Absolutely not
12. Are you content with your proficiency in the following skills?
 - 1) Grammar Absolutely yes Yes No Absolutely not
 - 2) Vocabulary Absolutely yes Yes No Absolutely not
 - 3) Reading Absolutely yes Yes No Absolutely not
 - 4) Listening Absolutely yes Yes No Absolutely not
 - 5) Speaking Absolutely yes Yes No Absolutely not
 - 6) Writing Absolutely yes Yes No Absolutely not
 - 7) Pronunciation Absolutely yes Yes No Absolutely not
 - 8) Pragmatics Absolutely yes Yes No Absolutely not
 - 9) Other skills (Please explain _____)
13. Do you compare your proficiency with native speakers'??
 Always (100%) Usually (80%) Sometimes (50%) Occasionally (20%) Never (0%)
14. Do you have anxiety about teaching English because of your language proficiency?
 Absolutely yes Yes No Absolutely not
15. If your answer (to Question #14) is yes, what are you anxious about? Please choose as many as applicable to you.
 - 1) Students asking questions
 - 2) Teaching communicative activities
 - 3) Correcting students' errors
 - 4) Giving feedback on students' pronunciation
 - 5) Giving instructions to students
 - 6) Answering questions about the target culture

- 7) Others (please explain _____)
16. If you answered “absolutely yes” or “yes” to Question #14, please describe how you manage your anxiety: _____
17. Have you talked to anyone about your anxiety? ___ Yes ___ No
18. If yes, with whom? Choose as many choices as applicable to you.
- a. A native English-speaking classmate/colleague
 - b. A nonnative English-speaking classmate/colleague
 - c. Your family
 - d. Your professor(s)
 - e. Your employer
 - f. Your mentor (please explain _____)
 - g. Others (please explain _____)
19. Have you done or are you doing anything to improve your language proficiency?
___ Yes ___ No
20. If yes (for Question #19), please describe what you have done or are doing right now:

21. What has helped you most to improve your proficiency in English?

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