

Deconstructing the Dichotomy of Native and Non-Native speakers of English: An Analysis of Current Research

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Abstract

This paper deconstructs the dichotomy of native (NS) and non-native (NNS) speakers of English and their assumed roles as experts and novices, respectively, during interactions. The paper adopts a qualitative methodology inspired by the lenses of discourse analysis and social constructivism. In an attempt to discover how the identities of NSs and NNSs are being constructed by researchers, two types of studies were analyzed. First, studies that constructed the NS as a relative expert compared to the NNS were examined. Second, studies that deconstructed the notion of native as experts through various methods were analyzed. The author argues that NSs' linguistic experiences should not be the defining elements of expertise in these interactions; rather, individual characteristics and expertise must be factored into the equation. In conclusion, the social construct of the expert-novice identities among NS and NNS is unfair to both parties, especially to the NNS. Implications for teachers and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: expert-novice, linguistic competence, native speakers, non-native speakers, peer-response groups

Introduction

Multilingual writers who use English as a second language (L2) have been categorized over the years as novices relative to their native-speaking peers for whom English is a first language (L1). The dichotomy of native (NSs) and non-native speakers (NNSs) is normalized in research and educational settings because of the assumption that the goal of L2 writers is to achieve “native” proficiency in English. Although some researchers have started to deconstruct the concept of the native speaker (Radwańska-Williams, 2006), many others still perceive this construct as the norm. The construct of NSs versus NNSs of English suggests that NSs have more linguistic expertise than NNSs; therefore, they are the experts in any interactions in which English is used. For instance, when L2 and L1 writers are engaged in oral or written discussions, it is assumed that L2 writers are the novices in these interactions, and they have to learn from their L1 peers. The reverse is never considered.

The paper addresses this dichotomous notion from a social constructivist lens to analyze how participants position themselves in interactions and discussions with others. Since, “constructivist researchers often address the ‘processes’ of interactions among individuals. They also focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work” (Creswell, 2013, p.25). Accordingly, this paper argues that although NSs do have more experience with the English language, they cannot be assumed to be experts in all interactions with NNSs, who may have more experience with the topic or major under discussion.

Through discourse analysis, the goal of this paper is to deconstruct this dichotomy by exploring how it was constructed within the research and to illustrate the fault in assuming that the novice-expert roles are merely based on linguistic competence. To achieve this aim, the author will analyze relevant studies conducted over the past 15 years. Additional studies challenging this constructed dichotomy of native expert and non-native novice will be examined as well.

Defining Major Concepts

Before the analysis begins, some important concepts need to be defined. The first to be explained is peer response and groups, as they appear often in the examined studies. Peer response, according to Liu and Hansen (2002), is the following:

The use of learners as source[s] of information and interactants for each other in such a way that learners assume roles and responsibilities normally taken on by a formally trained teacher, tutor, or editor in commenting on and critiquing each other’s drafts in both written and oral formats in the process of writing (p. 1).

Additionally, peer response could occur either between two individuals (a dyad) or a group, which, according to Ehrman and Dornye (1998), is “three or more interdependen[t] individuals who influence one another through focused social interaction” (as cited in Liu & Hansen, 2002, p. 59). Moreover, heterogeneous groups are defined as ones in which students have different interests, linguistic competencies, and proficiency levels (Liu & Hansen, 2002, p. 65). This definition applies to the peer response groups of L1 and L2 writers.

Some terms appearing in the analyzed studies could be considered slightly ambiguous. For example, Wong and Waring’s (2010) interactional practices include any “verbal or nonverbal methods participants use to engage in social interaction” (p.12). In addition, sequencing refers to how participants connect two or more steps in responding to a request, while

repair practices refers to “the various ways of addressing problems in speaking, hearing, or understanding [speech]” (Wong & Waring, 2010, pp. 10–11). Finally, we address the idea of the “emic perspective,” which Pike (1967) defines as “a way of looking at language and social interaction from an ‘insider’s’ perspective” (p.6).

The Significance of Deconstructing the Native and Non-Native Dichotomy

The assumed expert-novice roles should be detached from linguistic competence as it affects all parts of the interaction negatively, especially for L2 writers or NNSs. It is important to analyze the conception of L2 and L1 writers’ roles in peer responses and classroom interactions “because our underlying assumptions directly affect the ways we design peer response activities” (Hall, 2009, p.1). Additionally, by assuming only one individual is an expert, we are denying others in the group (i.e., the novices) the agency to participate equally within the group. Besides, the novice could sometimes agree with whatever the expert suggests without negotiation, which could affect his or her learning experience. Moreover, the native, expert speaker might feel that his or her novice peer is an inferior learner who is incapable of providing sufficient responses. Thus, both parts of this equation could be harmed by this dichotomy. Moreover, this matter should be of interest to teachers of multilingual writers who could design their curriculum and their peer response activities to overcome these false assumptions.

Methodology

The data collected for this study came from several research articles from journals as well as books in which the researchers studied the expert-novice identity constructions of native and non-native participants. This analysis focused on two types of studies: (a) studies centered on the situated learning framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which is based on the assumption that learning occurs when the novice interacts with an individual who is an expert within a community of practice; and (b) studies that attempted to reconstruct and deconstruct the dichotomy of native and non-native roles in interactions using various methods (Wegner, 1998). The studies are presented in chronological order; however, the first section also groups the studies according to the type of interaction examined. Two theoretical frameworks will be used in this analysis: social constructivism and discourse analysis. This analysis will further illustrate how some researchers have recognized the significance of deconstructing the expert-novice dichotomy and have started to explore and analyze it in their studies.

Research Constructing the Dichotomy of NS = Expert and NNS = Novice

Two types of interactions will be assessed in this paper: (a) peer response research that investigates mixed-group (NSs and NNSs) peer responses, and (b) Ordinary interactions or conversations between NSs and NNSs. In both types of interactions, expertise is attached to the NSs because of linguistic competence. Under this assumption, anyone who is learning English as an L2 will be considered a novice to any native speaker. I will further analyze this assumption in the next part of the paper.

Peer Response Between Heterogeneous Groups (NSs/NNSs)

The following studies concerning peer responses between NS and NNS students promote the notion of learning from the experts and of being exposed to native output. This notion instantly assumes the novice role belongs to the L2 writers, thus raising the L1 peers to a superior knowledge position. Wachholz (1997) gathered 11 students of different linguistic backgrounds in writing peer response groups. He believed his ESL students would benefit from

“observing superior writing” (Wachholz, 1997, p.7). However, the NS students were expected to show no gain or benefits. Consequently, after 10 weeks of classroom observations and interviews with students, the results showed that neither group benefited from this experience. In addition, the NSs were condescending to their peers and felt the need “to act superior” (p.12), while the NNSs struggled with and resisted some of their peers’ comments. Thus, the failure of this peer response experience resulted from the participants’ presumed inequality.

A subsequent study was performed under slightly similar, if not worse, assumptions. Matsuda and Silva (1999) designed a cross-cultural composition classroom that was supposed to be beneficial for both NSs and NNSs. However, most of the study was focused on the gains of the NNSs and how this class would make them more “prepared to work with NSs” (Matsuda & Silva, 1999, p. 249). Additionally, the researchers frequently constructed the ESL students’ identities as deficient learners, which consequently made their native peers the experts (Matsuda & Silva, 1999). During the exit interviews, students from both groups had positive perspectives about this cross-cultural experience. Despite the positive outcomes the participants conveyed, the researchers’ assumptions about the participants’ roles helped to construct the NS-NNS dichotomy as well as the expert-novice roles.

Similarly, Zhu (2001) studied linguistically heterogeneous peer response groups. The researcher’s assumptions about the identities of experts and novices in these groups were clear. He argued that peer response was challenging for the L2 writers and that the natives were better equipped and had more of an advantage in this interaction. The collected data illustrated that both groups of students complied with their assumed roles. The L1 writers took the expert role and interrupted and dismissed the L2 writers’ comments on their papers. On the other hand, L2 writers acted like true novices by not initiating interactions and taking fewer turns during oral interactions. As in the previously mentioned two studies, the researcher’s underlying assumptions constructed the natives as relative experts to their non-native peers.

Other researchers had similar assumptions with different results. Mackey, Oliver, and Leeman (2003) investigated how NNS students respond to feedback from NS students and fellow NNS students. The researchers emphasized the “advantages for learners” as being exposed to “target-like” input that would help them improve their “non-target-like output” (Mackey, Oliver, & Leeman, 2003, pp. 37–40). Although the researchers never explained what they meant by target-like output and input, it is clear from the context that they consider any NS to have target-like input. Accordingly, any NNS would have a non-target-like input. This false generalization represents a huge foundation for the constructed dichotomy of NS/NNS. However, despite their assumptions, the researchers found no significant differences between NNS’s responses to feedback from the NS and NNS, which proves that their feedback was equally good.

The next study took a somewhat unorthodox approach to examining peer response among mixed groups. Ruecker (2011) explored the dual-language cross-cultural peer response by comparing Chilean students who spoke English as a second language with American students who spoke Spanish as a second language. The point of this specific grouping was to empower both groups of students by having them take turns being the NS and the NNS. The researcher explained his method as “pairing language learners with fluent speakers to ensure that each member [is] matched with [a] skilled partner” (Ruecker, 2011, p. 399). However, the data

illustrated the fault in assuming NS's expertise. This assumption made the NNS agree to whatever the NS said without negotiation because they felt they could not correct the NS. Additionally, the NS gave "overly positive feedback" to their NNS peers that appeared to be patronizing (Ruecker, 2011, p. 403). Although this method had many positive attributes, among which was combining students with similar language learning experiences, it still constructed the natives as relative experts, albeit unintentionally.

Similarly, Bradley (2014) incorporated a new method into the traditional peer review process with the same assumptions as the studies published in the 1990s. NS students are assumed to be the experts. Bradley (2014) conducted a mixed-group peer review through a wiki between American (L1) and Swedish (L2) students. The purpose of this peer review, as was the case in earlier studies, was to improve the L2 writers' skills by having them interact with "students of more expertise" (Bradley, 2014, p. 81). However, the students were of different educational levels. The L2 students were Master's students while the L1 students were undergraduates. Still, the researcher assumed the L1 writers were the experts in this interaction, so no gains were expected for them. Moreover, the L2 writers stated during interviews that although they received valuable feedback from the NSs, it was not always useful (Bradley, 2014). Therefore, the researcher's assumptions led him to assign the expert roles to the NS students based solely on their linguistic expertise, with little regard for the L2 writers' potential.

Interactions Between NSs and NNSs

Various other studies perpetuate the concept of NSs as experts, but in different kinds of interactions. Some of these studies not only showed the researchers' assumptions about the expert-novice roles in these interactions, but also highlighted how the L2 users positioned themselves in their socially constructed novice roles. The following analysis will demonstrate the depth of the expert-novice identity construct and its influence on L2 users.

Thonus (2004) exemplified the influences of this construct on a specific kind of educational interaction between NNS and writing center tutors in his report of five studies that analyzed the tutor-tutee discourse. More specifically, these studies examined the differences in the tutors' interactions with their NS and NNS tutees. Tutors treated NNS as novices by assuming more authority during the interactions and by rejecting the tutees' input. "Furthermore, tutors will often reject NNS self-evaluations and self-suggestions" (Thonus, 2004, p. 234). However, no claiming of authority or rejecting of tutees' suggestions occurred during the NS sessions. Moreover, the tutors were more involved in conversations with their NS tutees than with their NNS ones. During sessions with NNSs, tutors tend to focus on the discussed material. All in all, the findings suggested huge differences in tutor behavior regarding their interactions with NS and NNS students. These behaviors resulted from—and, at the same time, contributed to—the socially constructed identities of NNSs as novices and NSs as experts.

On the other hand, Chamberlin-Quinlisk (2008) unfairly distributed labels between his participants, which led to a faulty conclusion. The participants were divided into three groups: monolingual NSs, multilingual NSs, and non-native English speakers. He denied the non-native participants the right to be multilingual, although they clearly were. Thus, the researcher constrained his definition of multilingual to being a native English speaker with knowledge of other languages. He examined the intercultural adaptability of the three groups through surveys and found the multilingual NSs to be the most adaptable. Consequently, he concluded that this

resulted from their access to more than one language, regardless of the fact their non-native peers had the same access. Moreover, the non-native English speakers were identified in many places as language learners, even though their multilingual native peers who were also learning other languages received no such identification. Therefore, it is evident that this study promotes the superiority of NSs in addition to constructing the dichotomy of expert-novice in relationship to linguistic competence.

Jeong Ha (2009) discussed how L2 users adopt novice roles during online interactions with L1 users. In addition, this researcher illustrated the construction of expert-novice identities at the micro level of interactions during an online disciplinary discourse between NSs and NNSs of English. The aim of Jeong Ha's (2009) study was to analyze "computer-mediated discussions by non-native novice graduate students" (p. 11) and how those students negotiate their identities with "other experienced students" (p. 14). The results showed that NNSs acted as relative novices during the interactions, and they invoked the expert identities of their native peers by requesting clarifications or new information. Consequently, L2 users submitted to their socially constructed identities as novices by making little or no effort to refute their positions.

In the same way, a study by Vendergriff (2013) offered an important look at how NNSs constructed themselves as novices during interactions with NSs. He examined dyadic online interactions between NSs and NNSs to discover how both groups' identities were constructed through this interaction. The findings indicated that NNSs constantly positioned themselves as novices by making jokes about their errors and apologizing for their linguistic incompetence. Furthermore, NSs positioned themselves as experts by taking the role of the interaction manager who initiates and closes the sequences (Vendergriff, 2013). Thus, this micro-level interaction is representative of a macro-level construct in which the NSs are almost always assumed to be the experts when interacting with NNSs.

Giroir (2014) portrayed a broader perspective concerning this construct than the previous studies. His research provided an emic perspective of two NNSs about their identities in an English-speaking society. Giroir (2014) aimed to:

[Address] this issue by looking more closely at the activities and interactions that take place at the periphery of communities of practice, conceptualizing that space as a dynamic site of struggle in which learners construct their identities through their ongoing discursive practices within those communities (p. 36).

After six months of data collection, Giroir (2014) found that the two students positioned themselves as outsiders, and they did not feel the need to merge into the host society. Their socially constructed novice identities resulted from the assumption that expertise is associated with native language speaking. These assumptions clearly deny L2 learners the opportunity to fully participate in their L2 communities.

Research Deconstructing the Dichotomy of NS= Experts and NNS=Novice

Over the years, several studies have discussed this issue of relating expertise to linguistic competence. These studies have succeeded in deconstructing the concept of native superiority and have proven that NNSs can indeed be experts in interactions. Furthermore, these studies have shown that "the constitution of expert-novice in dynamic interaction is a much more complicated, shifting, moment-by-moment reconstruction of self and other" (Jacoby & Gonzales,

1991, p. 149). Therefore, those identities cannot and should not be predicted or assumed beforehand. Moreover, the “labels of novice, basic, and remedial writers [do] not recognize NNS strengths” (Kibler, 2010, p.122). As such, these labels could limit L2 learners’ participation and development. Thus, it is imperative to think of NNSs as equally competent partners who can affect NSs as much as they are affected by them. Much has been learned about the deconstruction of the expert-novice dichotomy in regards to linguistic competence.

First, Chen (2003) did a study on interactions between NSs and NNSs of English. He compared NS-NS interactions with NS-NNS interactions, and his findings indicated that when NSs and NNSs interacted, many positive connections emerged. NSs were more engaged and adaptable in their interactions with NNSs, and they used more words than with their NS peers. Chen (2003) reached “a conclusion that NS participants in NS-NNS conversations had a more active cognitive experience” (p. 200). These findings demonstrated the gains that NSs can have while participating with their NNS peers. Those gains had previously been neglected in previous studies that only predicted that NNSs would benefit from interacting with the experts.

Second, a study by Hosoda (2006) aimed at deconstructing the native categorization, attempting to show that it is irrelevant during most interactions between NSs and NNSs. Although the L1 in this study was Japanese, its findings are equally important. In his examination of the relevance of language expertise in ordinary conversation between L1 and L2 Japanese speakers, Hosoda (2003) noticed that “second language speakers engage in similar conversing practices as NS” (p. 29). Furthermore, L2 speakers usually invoked linguistic expertise during conversation. Nonetheless, Hosoda concluded that language expertise was merely a resource that was used as needed. It was usually summoned by the L2, and it did not dominate NS-NNS interactions. These findings exemplified the irrelevancy of linguistic competence during these interactions.

Correspondingly, Park (2007) continued his fellow researchers’ path in deconstructing the native-as-expert notion. Park (2007) argued that:

Identity is constructed through-during-interaction and is not a predetermined construct that is lodged within each individual mind.... Further, identity is viewed as a situated, emergent construct that arises from the contingencies of local interactions. Identity ascription is thus highly context-specific (p. 341).

In light of these statements, Park examined the interactions between two NSs and two NNSs and found interesting results. The constructed identities were found to be both dynamic and negotiable. In addition, some minor identities, such as the requestor-requestee and assessor-assessed, emerged through the interactions. The researcher proved that NS-NNS asymmetry was not fixed; therefore, it cannot be predetermined or assumed. Instead, it has to be negotiated among the participants. As a result, this study established many notions that aid in the deconstruction of NNSs as relative novices to their NS colleagues.

Vickers (2008) exemplified to what extent linguistic expertise can be irrelevant during NSs and NNSs’ interactions through her investigation into “embodied experience in the world” (p. 237). She examined the interactions of two engineers (one NS and one NNS English speaker) as they worked on the same project. However, Vickers believed that “by assuming a priori that the NS is the communicative expert in interactions with the NNS, we may fail to see what [may]

interactionally unfold” (2008, p. 239). The data demonstrated that the expert among this group of engineers was, in fact, the L2 user. Although the L1 user had more expertise in English, he was the novice in this interaction about computer programming and its terminology. Thus, this study showed the fault in attributing expertise to NSs without considering other factors such as context specific knowledge.

In another study, Vickers (2010) examined the construction of expert-novice identities during NS-NNS interactions as well as the relationship between those identities and linguistic competence. Vickers collected data from interactions between NS and NNS students in an electrical and computer engineering course. She argued that “the construction, re-construction and co-construction of expert–novice occurs at the micro-interactive level as one individual takes control of the framework for understanding while engaged in practice with another person” (Vickers, 2010, p. 117). She also believed one’s non-nativeness should not define the interaction. However, this study’s results showed that NSs adopted the expert role in this interaction, leaving the novice role to their NNS peers. However, the NS’s expertise did not result from linguistic competence; rather, it was due to the fact they had more access to the engineering teams and more familiarity with the way they talked than NNSs. Therefore, the expert role was not assumed based on linguistic expertise but instead on actual interactive experiences.

Crossman and Kite (2012) examined peer reviews between the members of a heterogeneous group in an MBA course, in which 70% of the students were NNS. However, the authors had no prior assumptions concerning how the groups would operate or who the experts would be in these interactions. Rather, all the participants were identified as just students, and their linguistic backgrounds were barely mentioned. Neither of these aspects seemed to affect the study’s results in any significant way. Additionally, the participants were given a rubric to guide them through reviewing each other’s business proposals. The results indicated that about 80% of the students benefited from this peer response experience. This was apparent in the quality of their revised papers. This research positively constructed NS and NNS students as equally competent interaction partners, and mutual gains were expected for both groups of students. This constructive and equal distribution of participant roles paved the way for positive outcomes and thoroughly deconstructed the native-novice dichotomy.

In the same year, Dings (2012) also found that the expert-novice identities of NSs and NNSs were just resources that were available if and when the participants needed them. The researcher examined six conversations between one NS and one NNS of English over the course of one year to examine the dynamic of expert-novice identities and how the two participants co-created them. The researcher believed that although “there is an omnipresent asymmetry in NS/NNS interaction to which the participants can orient at any time...it is not interactionally relevant at all times” (Dings, 2012, p. 1505). To test this statement, he analyzed the conversations of his participants to find out to what extent their identities were constructed based on their linguistic expertise. Consequently, Dings’ analysis revealed that the NS and NNS participants did orient to their linguistic competence when the conversation needed to be repaired. In addition, the NNS requested the repair, which appealed to the NS’s expert identity. Otherwise, linguistic expertise and the expert-novice roles were irrelevant during most of the conversations. Thus, this research confirmed the irrelevancy of the presuppositions regarding linguistic competence in NS-NNS interactions.

Similarly, Bae and Oh (2013) studied conversational repair between NSs and NNSs of English and how it related to the participants' identities by recording five sets of casual conversations between three NS Americans and eight NNS Koreans. The data analysis illustrated that the NS-NNS identities were only relevant when there was a miscommunication. Otherwise, these identities had no bearings on the interactions. Thus, English linguistic expertise did not define the participants' roles during the interactions and should not be made relevant until the participants deem it appropriate. Additionally, the expert-novice identities were dynamic and changed according to the specific participants involved.

Conversely, Jungmi (2003) and Reichert and Liebscher (2012) investigated interactions between NNSs of English. NSs were excluded from both studies because it was thought that more learning opportunities could occur in NNS-NNS interactions. Their arguments refuted the idea that language learning could only occur during NS-NNS interactions. Jungmi (2003) examined NNS-NNS interactions through computer-mediated communication. He argued that since there is an asymmetrical relationship between NSs and NNSs during interactions, the NSs should not be part of these communications. He justified the elimination of NSs in his study by arguing that he provided "a non-threatening forum within which to practice developing language skills and also an opportunity to receive input that learners could have made comprehensible through negotiation" (Jungmi, 2003, p. 190). In other words, he believed his NNS participants did not need to interact with NSs to acquire native-like proficiency. Accordingly, his findings indicated that the students were engaged in this interaction, and their engagement was apparent through many communicative strategies. However, no unequal relations existed between the participants, which created a higher likelihood for learning the target language. In this way, the study showed the irrelevancy of the expert-novice identities for L2 users for language learning.

Correspondingly, Reichert and Liebscher (2012) demonstrated that expert-novice identities do exist in the NNS-NNS interactions. Thus, they deconstructed the concept of the native as expert and demonstrated the capability of L2 users to be experts during interactions. When NNSs negotiate for the expert position, more learning opportunities occur. Using this argument, Reichert and Liebscher (2012) challenged "the fixed notions of expert and novice and highlight[ed] the roles of interpersonal context" (p. 599). Simply put, if NNSs can negotiate for expert roles with each other, they can do it in interactions with NS if they are encouraged to seek their true potential and are not overwhelmed by the construction of the NS as instant experts. Nevertheless, the researchers concluded that many opportunities for learning emerged during the students' negotiations for an expert position. As Reichert and Liebscher (2012) explained, "this trend contrast[ed] with teacher- student or NS-NNS interaction[s, in which] teacher or NS knowledge [was] largely taken for granted and seldom openly challenged" (p. 607). Additionally, Reichert and Liebscher's conclusion suggests that the learners were "interactively [creating] opportunities for learning through negotiation of information" (2012, p. 607). Thus, when the native-as-expert and non-native-as-novice conceptions are deconstructed, the NNS will be able to negotiate for the expert position with the NS, subsequently resulting in more learning opportunities.

Conclusion

In this paper, the author deconstruct the conception of NSs as relative experts in their interactions with NNSs of English to change the common conception "that the non-native

speaker is somehow imperfect and inferior in linguistic competence to the native speaker” (Radwańska-Williams, 2006, p.142). By the same construct, the native speaker is also considered to be an “author[itative and reliable source]” based solely on linguistic competence (Radwańska-Williams, 2006, p.142). Therefore, inspired by social constructivism and discourse analysis, the method of examination was twofold. The first portion of this paper examined research in which NSs have been immediately constructed as, or are assumed to be, experts when they engage in interactions or peer response groups with NNSs. The second portion explored other research that has attempted to deconstruct the expert-novice dichotomy. By reviewing studies that both construct and deconstruct this dichotomy, it was hoped that the inequality inherent in some common assumptions about NSs and NNSs of English would be revealed. It is unfair to identify a person’s role in an interaction based solely on the order in which they learned a language.

Hopefully , this analysis will help teachers of multilingual students design their curriculum and peer response activities based on what they know about their students’ special characteristics and not just on their experiences with English. Additionally, this analysis should help researchers refine their assumptions about their (NS and NNS) participants’ abilities and provide them with equal opportunities to claim the expert role in their interactions. Finally, more research is ought to be done to challenge these socially constructed identities, especially as the number of people learning English as a second language is rapidly growing. NNSs have the right to claim expertise as much as any NS of English they might encounter.

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