How to end native speaker privilege

By Ingrid Piller  |  May 31, 2018  |  Education

For some time now, a debate has been raging in TESOL about the relative merits of native and non-native speakers as English language teachers. While many people in the field are critical of the continued dominance of native speakers as “ideal” teachers, proposals for change have largely been ineffectual.

True, job ads asking for “native speakers” are now widely considered discriminatory and the relative strengths of both groups are spurned at conferences. However, none of this has much changed the fact that institutions, students and parents, by and large, continue to prefer TESOL teachers who they consider to be native speakers; that such teachers are oftentimes paid more and hired into more secure employment; and that teachers considered non-native are regularly subject to micro-aggressions such as having their expertise called into question.

Is there a more effective way to overcome native speaker hegemony other than to educate people about the native speaker fallacy?

Absolutely. It has been done before. The following object lesson of native speaker subordination comes from an unlikely source, namely the British Empire and specifically the East India Company.

**Persian – India’s power code**

To understand this case study, a bit of historical context is required: when the British brought the Indian subcontinent under colonial control, they displaced an existing state, the Mughal Empire. The Mughals’ state
language was Persian. In the 18th century, when the British rapidly expanded and consolidated their possessions on the subcontinent, Persian had been India’s written language, its power code and its lingua franca for over three centuries. In other words, Persian was the Moghuls’ “technology of governance” (Fisher, 2012, pp. 328f.).

In order to rule India, it was therefore essential to know Persian. And Indians knew Persian. Britons did not.

As the East India Company tightened its grip on India, it approached this problem gradually by first replacing Indian speakers of Persian with British speakers of Persian and, further down the track, replacing Persian with English as the language of the state. It is the first step in this process that concerns us here: how did the East India Company go about replacing Indians with Britons as privileged knowers of Persian?

Establishing a Persian language teaching industry

Initially, British colonial officials who wanted to learn Persian (or any other Indian language) were largely left to their own devices and such language study was a matter of private enterprise. Many hired Indian language teachers as private tutors.

Gradually, Persian language learning became more formalized and dedicated language training institutes were established. The most important of these were Fort William College in Calcutta, and, back home in Britain, Haileybury Imperial Service College and Addiscombe Military Seminary. These institutes all opened in the first decade of the 19th century.

Since the 18th century, Persian-speaking Indian elites had increasingly shifted from working for the Mughal Empire and its ever smaller and more fragmented successor states to accepting employment from the British. For many of them this meant becoming language teachers.

In India, teaching was a highly respected profession and Indian teachers of Persian initially assumed a high-status position vis-à-vis their British students. They were in a bull market, or so it must have seemed: Persian language teaching became ever more widespread and profitable, not only in the colony, but also in Britain, where middle-class families clamoured for an education that would ensure their sons’ future in lucrative
colonial positions. Just how profitable the teaching of Indian languages was can be seen from the autobiography of one such language teacher, Lutfullah:

*I regularly held the profession of a teacher of the Persian, Hindustani, Arabic, and Marathi languages to the new comers from England, from time to time, and place to place, as their duty obliged and caprice induced them to go. Upwards of one hundred pupils studied with me during the above period, and none of my scholars returned unlaureled from the Government examination committees. I have a book of most flattering certificates in my possession, and I may say that I was better off than many by following this profession.*
*(Lutfullah, 1858, p. 139)*

In the colonial logic of the assumed inferiority of the colonized, high-status Indian language teachers with a good income soon became the targets of envy and efforts to undermine them got underway. Returned colonial officials, in particular, wanted teaching positions for themselves rather than see them occupied by Indians. Given their clout and connections, many of them managed to be recruited into Persian language teaching positions in the new imperial training institutes. That their language competence was sometimes almost non-existent did not matter.

The Professor of Oriental Literature at Addiscombe, for instance, was one John Shakespear, who not only drew a professorial salary but supplemented his income by publishing numerous textbooks and teaching aids. His most successful textbook was one of the earliest grammars of Urdu, *A Grammar of the Hindustani Language*. First published in 1813, it was reprinted and re-issued in new editions for almost half a century. The above-mentioned Lutfullah met Shakespear during his visit to England in 1844 and describes his encounter as follows:

*[I] had the honour of being introduced to three men of learning, viz., John Shakespear, the author of the Hindustani Dictionary [...]. Knowing the first-named gentleman to be the author of a book in our language, I addressed to him a very complimentary long sentence in my own language. But, alas! I found that he could not understand me, nor could he
utter a word in that language in which he had composed several very useful books. (Lutfullah, 1858, p. 389)

Subordinating native speakers

The above example can leave no doubt that the linguistic qualifications of Indians were superior to those of British language teachers. Even so, the former were excluded almost entirely from the enterprise of Persian language teaching, well before that enterprise was abandoned entirely in favour of making Indians learn English.

The subordination of native speaker teachers was achieved in two ways, namely through arguments related to teacher identity and through a reorganization of language teaching.

The arguments related to teacher identity basically stated that Muslim men were unfit to teach Christian boys and young men. The board of Haileybury College, for instance, decided in 1816 that “the linguistic advantages of having a ‘native speaker’ teach British students was outweighed by the alleged disruption these Muslim Indian men had on the students’ moral education” (Fisher, 2012, p. 344). As in other language training institutions, Indian teachers were replaced with British teachers.

Reorganization of language teaching meant that Indian ways of language teaching (through the study of literature) were devalued in favour of British ways of language teaching (through the study of grammars and dictionaries). While the former approach requires a high level of language competence of the teacher, the latter does not.

Furthermore, Indian teachers were reframed as specialists in pronunciation, and pronunciation as a language skill was marginalized. Instead of hiring them into teacher roles, Indian teachers were offered positions as drill masters and teaching assistants of British teachers. The latter were fashioned as experts both in methods of language teaching and in the grammar skills that were now considered the essential test of language competence.
By the 1840s, all Indian language teachers had been removed from imperial language training institutes and the newly established university chairs in Persian, Arabic and other oriental languages all went to Britons. Any Indian language teachers who remained in Britain were relegated to the private tutoring market, which was shrinking, too, as a knowledge of Persian and other Indian languages became increasingly irrelevant to pursuing a career in the colonies.

Who is to be master?

As is obvious from this brief account, the battle between Indians and Britons over who was a better teacher of Indian languages was fought on linguistic terrain only on the surface. Some of the British 19th century superstars of oriental language teaching such as John Shakespere obviously had serious linguistic deficits. That did not keep them from becoming privileged knowers of colonial languages. A holistic knowledge of the language, cultural competence and conversational fluency were all devalued in favour of a focus on methods and a narrow understanding of language proficiency as grammatical mastery.

Ironically, once Persian was out of the way as the power code of India and the global English language teaching enterprise got underway, the rules of the game were re-written yet again. What we consider desirable linguistic competence today is to a significant degree shaped by the strengths and weaknesses of the new privileged language knowers, native speakers of English.

References

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August 9, 2018 at 12:40 pm