Pronunciation: The effect on ESL teacher's identity and professional attrition

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Teacher attrition – teachers exiting the profession before retirement age – has been the topic of research since the 1970's. While it is easy to conceive that some students prefer to complete their university program although having already decided not to pursue a career in the field, attrition levels in education can be alarming: according to Létourneau (2014), between 25% and 30% of teachers leave the profession after their first year and between 40% and 50% after 5 years. Other publications indicate lower levels of attrition. Martel, Ouellette et Ratté (2003) note for instance that 25% of teachers who started their career in 1991 left within 5-years' experience. The domain of language teaching seems however to be particularly affected by attrition (Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd, 2012; Mason, 2017; Sibieta, 2020). Many factors contribute to teacher attrition. In their exhaustive review of the literature, Karsenti, Collin and Dumouchel (2013) identify four main factor types: 1) task-related factors (such as unsatisfactory working conditions, difficult classrooms, etc.); 2) individual factors (emotional and psychological); 3) social environment factors (failed relations with educational and social actors); and 4) socioeconomic conditions factors. Kelchtermans (2017) identifies some of the reasons as the central role of social relationships and teachers' need for social recognition as well as sense of belonging.

This article concentrates on the issues of professional teacher identity and the need for the non-native English as a second language teachers (NNEST) to be able to develop a sense of professional belonging, of legitimacy and self-efficacy. The aspect of language competency, notably, oral skills is given special attention in this process.

Personal identity evokes notions of individuality, uniqueness, identification, and legitimacy. Part of this personal identity is generated by the way we sound. One's accent provides information related to social class, origin, location, age, and education. Furthermore, voice, voice setting, and speech patterns reveal more information about the speaker which, ultimately, helps us to identify a speaker among the people we know. Professional self-identity can be defined as "[o]ne's sense of self as a member of a profession or work" (Sobel & Evans, 2020) and "the degree to which an individual identifies with his or her professional group" (Vivekananda-Schmidt, Crossley, & Murdoch-Eaton, 2015). So, what happens when individuals feel that some of their personal identity traits conflict with the expected professional identity traits? For NNESTs, oral expression, and pronunciation more specifically, can represent such a conflict between personal identity and professional identity.

Linguistic proficiency is central to teaching a language and teacher training programs provide language and linguistics courses. With the multitude of domains to cover in such programs (education policies and theories, pedagogy, psychology, literature, etc.), most students graduate with a sufficient, but not ultimate, level of the language. While all educational domains (mathematics, physical education, geography, etc.) yield teachers of varying degrees of competence, the language teaching domain must contain with the dichotomy between native-speakers (NESTs) and non-native (NNEST) speakers. The entrenched ideological premise is that NESTs are the only reliable models for language teaching, particularly for oral production and pronunciation. This is well-documented and highly noticeable, notably in English as a Foreign Language contexts "in which the credibility of language schools is thought to hinge on the act of hiring expatriate NESTs to teach English language courses" (Watson-Todd & Pojanapunya, 2009 in Alghazo & Zidan, 2019) and in which "even backpackers with no teaching qualifications or teaching experience are extended a warm welcome" (Medgyes, 2001 in Alghazo & Zidan, 2019). NESTs are however reported to present deficits in their teaching. For instance, rather than using their "natural" language, some develop a "foreigner-talk" (Ellis, 2012), a grammatically, lexically, and phonetically simplified form of their language to be better understood by learners. Furthermore, these speakers lack the knowledge of the students'

L1 and the experience of having learnt the L2, which is very useful in deciding which linguistic elements to concentrate on and the pedagogical strategies to use. Of course, having native-speaker knowledge and understanding of the language is an asset but it does not guarantee teacher efficacy. Being able to understand the source of learner linguistic difficulties, the L1 culture and social context and local pedagogical policies and strategies, the use of the L2 in their community, are NNESTs' highly valuable advantages. The overwhelming acceptance that being a native speaker of the L2 is shared by NNESTs and language learners who lose confidence in the NNESTs' ability to be good models and leads to the loss of oral expression, "the voice". Those are respectively labelled "cultural panic" and "voicelessness" by Alghazo and Zidan (2019).

Professional identity can be defined as "One's sense of self as a member of a profession or work" (Sobel & Evans, 2020) or as "The degree to which an individual identifies with his or her professional group" (Vivekananda-Schmidt Crossley, & Murdoch-Eaton, 2015). An element of professional identity, for language teachers, is thus the ability to use the L2 (like a native speaker) and is connected to the concepts of self-efficacy, self-confidence, and the sense of legitimacy. NNESTs who feel like they do not have what they perceive to be the most important competency – native speaker mastery of the language – and that they most likely will not fully attain this level might feel like they are not legitimate, that they are "second class" L2 teachers. Basically, they do not feel like they fully belong to the ESL teacher professional group and, consequently, do not develop their professional identity. Furthermore, everyday experience, where they deal with large, difficult classes in which students are reluctant to use the L2, and when they have very few opportunities to practice, let alone improve, their English – as is often the case outside of large cities –, L2 teachers might find that expressing themselves in the L2 is a constant burden. This, combined with all the other attrition factors, must weigh heavily on the new L2 teachers. For those reasons, it would seem wise to give greater attention to developing NNESTs' linguistic competencies during their university training and provide practice opportunities once in service. Not only would the teachers feel more confident, but they would also more easily identify as legitimate members of their professional community

and have greater self-efficacy. And possibly, giving NNESTs a voice might also impact teacher attrition.

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