

Book Review

The Non-Native Teacher, 3rd Edition

Péter Medgyes

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Reviewed by

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The Non-Native Teacher was originally published in 1994 by Péter Medgyes, an English as an additional language (EAL) professional who self identifies as a non-native speaker of English. While the book remains a highly personal text that draws from the Hungarian EAL context, the main argument for equity remains relevant in other teaching contexts, such as Canada. For example, as Laura Brass (2017) notes in her article “A ‘non-native speaker’ in a ‘native speaker’ world,” non-native English speaking teachers (non-NESTs) continue to struggle in English language teaching (ELT) contexts in British Columbia.

The third edition maintains its contentious binary structure comparing native-English speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-NESTs, two terms which have fallen out of favour over the last two decades. However, while Silvana Richardson argues in her foreword, the book “may at times sound slightly out of step with contemporary thinking” (p. v), she further asserts that “the fact that this text is still relevant today is symptomatic of the scale and magnitude of the non-NEST issue in our industry” (p. v).

The latest edition is divided into six symmetrically arranged parts, with each section containing two chapters. The most striking change in the third edition is the decision to separate the new content from the original using a striking two-colour format. The original text is black, while the newly added focus points, margin notes, and further readings are in blue. This decision in the updated edition simultaneously shows reverence to the original as a seminal work, while also making it more contemporary.

Parts 1 and 2, entitled “Being a non-native speaker” and “Being a non-native teacher” respectively, deal with issues facing non-NESTs that illustrate the subtle power dynamics between educators and learners. The author asserts that “students can only be motivated and helped after teachers have understood themselves” (p. 24).

The next section, “The two sides of the coin,” remains the most transformative and essential section of this book. Using subversive and provocative language, the author offers two contrasting perspectives of the non-native professional. The negative perspective looks at issues of self-worth and identity, whereas the positive perspective highlights being a good role model for language learning and being empathetic towards learners’ needs.

In Chapter 7 of Part 4, “Who’s worth more: the native or the non-native?,” the author argues against proficiency in language as a superior model of teaching. When answering the question related to what the ideal learning environment is, the author provides a diplomatic response maintaining “there should be a good balance of NESTs and non-NESTS, who complement each other in their strengths and weaknesses” (p. 84). The author offers a balanced perspective that still feels ahead of its time.

Part 5 and 6 go on to offer practical ideas and activities for non-NESTS and newly added material highlighting learner perceptions of NESTs and non-NESTS. Throughout the third edition, one of the merits of the new material is the further reading section at the end of every chapter. Pre-service teacher educators will likely find the articles presented form interesting debates on issues in EAL and ELT.

In summary, the author’s idiosyncratic voice can still surprise and provoke in equal measure. The third edition is likely to be a catalyst for discussion in pre-service EAL teacher education in British Columbia as well as other parts of Canada. Although Samimy’s (1997) review of the first edition noted weaknesses, such as the uneven treatment of language teaching factors and an overemphasis on the linguistic deficits of non-NESTS, which persist in this updated edition, *The Non-Native Teacher* is an essential primer for teacher education and non-NEST studies. As the profession continues to evolve and develop to be more inclusive, the call for balanced collaboration between NESTs and non-NESTS remains relevant for educators looking for a book that questions and pushes established boundaries.

References

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- Samimy, K. (1997). A Review on “The Non-native Teacher.” *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(4), pp. 815-817.



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