

Improving academic and professional oral proficiency: a collaborative language-focused graduate seminar for NNES graduate students in TESOL

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Resumen

MEJORA ACADÉMICA Y PROFESIONAL DE LA SUFICIENCIA ORAL: UN SEMINARIO LINGÜÍSTICO-COLABORATIVO PARA ESTUDIANTES NO NATIVOS EN TESOL
Este estudio se realizó con la finalidad de examinar la efectividad de un seminario colaborativo de 10 semanas dirigido a estudiantes de postgrado no nativos en la Universidad de Ohio, con el propósito de mejorar sus habilidades orales de comunicación en inglés. Se estableció una colaboración entre una profesora de la facultad, una estudiante del último año y una asistente especialista en entrenamiento de estudiantes internacionales preparadores de cátedra (International Teaching Asistants). El seminario cubrió aspectos prácticos y teóricos de las habilidades orales comunicativas en inglés. Se utilizaron métodos cuantitativos y cualitativos para recolectar los datos desde múltiples perspectivas. Los resultados obtenidos tienen implicaciones pedagógicas significativas para los programas de formación en TESOL (Enseñanza de Inglés a Hablantes de Otras Lenguas), en particular para la mejora de la suficiencia oral y sentido de legitimidad de los estudiantes no nativos que realizan estudios de postgrado.

Palabras clave: Profesionales no nativos, desarrollo profesional, suficiencia oral, del Inglés, capacitación.

Abstract

This article is based on a study which examined the effectiveness of a 10-week collaborative language-focused graduate seminar, offered in the Ohio State University, to improve NNES students' academic and professional oral English communication skills. The study was a collaboration among a TESOL faculty member, a senior NNES TESOL graduate student, and an ITA (International Teaching Asistant) specialist in language training. The seminar focused on both theoretical and practical aspects of oral English communication skills. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the study collected multiple data to answer the research questions. The findings have significant pedagogical implications for TESOL programs, in particular, for helping NNES TESOL graduate students improve their oral proficiency and their sense of legitimacy in the TESOL community.

Key words: NNES Professionals, professional development, English oral proficiency, empowerment.

Résumé

AMÉLIORER ACADÉMIQUE ET PROFESSIONNELLEMENT L'ORAL: UN SÉMINAIRE LINGUISTIQUE - COLLABORATIF POUR ÉTUDIANTS NON NATIFS EN TESOL
Cette étude a été réalisée dans le but d'examiner l'effectivité d'un séminaire en collaboratif de 10 semaines dirigé aux étudiants de Postgrado de l'Université d' Ohio dans, visant l'amélioration des habiletés orales de communication académique et professionnelle en anglais à des étudiants non-natifs. Nous avons établi une collaboration entre une professeur membre de la faculté, une étudiante de la dernière année et une assistante spécialiste en entraînement d'étudiants internationaux préparateurs de « cátedra». Le séminaire a couvert des aspects théoriques et pratiques des habiletés orales communicatives en anglais. Pour cela, nous avons utilisé de méthodes quantitatives et qualitatives dans le but de collecter les donnés des perspectives multiples. Les resultats ont des implications pédagogiques significatives pour les programmes de fomation en TESOL (enseignement en anglais à de parlants d'autres langues) en particulier pour l' amélioration de la capacité orale et le sens de légitimité des étudiants de postgrado non-natifs.

Mots-clés: Professionnels non-natifs, développement professionnel, capacité orale en anglais, formation.

1. Introduction

Research (Arva & Medgyes, 2000) has revealed how closely nonnative-English-speaking (NNES) professionals' English proficiency and their professional self-esteem are intertwined, and that having a high level of English proficiency is "the most valued aspect of a non-native English teacher's competence" (Murdoch, 1994, p. 253). However, researchers report that NNES teachers often feel inadequate about their English abilities. A study by Tang (1997), for example, revealed that NNES professionals felt inferior to their native-English-speaking (NES) counterparts in the areas of speaking (100%), pronunciation (92%), and listening skills (87%). Similarly, Medgyes (1994) discovered that NNES teachers «viewed themselves as poorer listeners, speakers, readers, and writers» (p. 33) compared against NES teachers. In addition, a survey conducted by Liu (1999) among NNES students in one TESOL program revealed that only 14% of the participants believed that they had the English proficiency to be a qualified English teacher.

Despite the inadequacies, NNES pre- and in-service teachers feel about their English proficiency, most TESOL programs do not offer help or training in improving NNES graduate students' English proficiency (cited in Liu, 1999); furthermore, most required courses in TESOL programs focus on students' explicit knowledge of the language rather than their ability to use that language (Liu, 1999). In addition, with the advent of Communicative Language Teaching (see Savignon, 1983; 2002) in EFL contexts, which emphasizes one's ability to use English for communicative purposes in authentic contexts, there has been tremendous pressure on NNES teachers to improve their oral English proficiency as they have been required to teach their classes in English.

These research findings strongly suggest that a TESOL program needs to address the urgent needs of NNES TESOL students by offering the language proficiency-related courses, particularly, which focus on their English oral proficiency, in order to help them become «effective, self-confident, and satisfied professionals» (Medgyes; 1999, p. 179).

In addition to the need for language training for NNES TESOL students, there has been research in

TESOL which challenges the native speaker superiority by deconstructing disempowering discourses in the TESOL community. Until recently, our field has been heavily influenced by the nativeness principle (Levis, 2005), by setting native speaker proficiency as the ultimate goal for L2 learners. However, as the ownership of English (Widdowson, 1994) has changed over the years, new constructs such as World Englishes (Kachru, 1985; 1997) and English as an International Language (Smith, 1976; 1983) have become more relevant, hence calling for paradigm shifts in our field by focusing more on the importance of intelligibility rather than the nativeness principle.

This paradigm shift has significant implications for pre- and in-service NNES teachers of the world. First, by focusing on the intelligibility principle (Levis, 2005) rather than the nativeness principle, NNES teachers can assert their legitimacy as ELT (English Language Teaching) professionals (see Golombeck & Jordan, 2005). Or through exposure to empowering discourses (Cook, 1999; Pavlenko, 2003, Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 1999), NNES teachers can reconceptualize their identities as legitimate members in the TESOL community. To summarize, for NNES teachers to feel empowered and successful, we argue that TESOL programs need to employ a two-prong approach by combining language training with theoretical discussions on what it means to be a successful and legitimate ELT professional.

In the following, we discuss the results of a study which was based on an experimental collaborative language-focused graduate seminar, offered in winter of 2006 at the Ohio State, designed to improve NNES students' academic and professional oral English communication skills offered. The study was guided by two research questions:

- (1) How can the seminar facilitate NNES TESOL students' development of academic and professional oral proficiency?
- (2) How can the seminar facilitate NNES TESOL students to gain their theoretical and pedagogical perspectives with regard to oral proficiency in English?

Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the study collected multiple data to answer the research questions. The findings have significant pedagogical implications for TESOL programs, in

particular, for helping NNES TESOL graduate students improve their academic and professional oral proficiency and their sense of legitimacy in the TESOL community.

2. Method

2.1. Needs Analysis

Prior to offering the language-focused graduate seminar, we conducted a needs analysis survey to better understand specific needs of NNES TESOL students with regard to their academic and professional oral proficiency. Almost all of them participated in the survey (13 out of 14) reported that they sometimes or frequently experience difficulty with any oral English communication skills in the U.S. context. They were most concerned about leading whole-class discussions (63%), presenting at a conference or in class (44%), and participating in large group discussions (38%). They identified formal oral presentations (88%), participating in whole-class discussions (83%) and small-group discussions (82%), and communicating well in an interview situation (82%) as the most important skills for academic and professional success.

2.2. Research Context: a Collaborative Language-Focused Graduate Seminar

Based on the needs analysis, we designed an experimental 10-week language-focused graduate seminar. It was a collaboration among a TESOL faculty member, a senior TESOL graduate student, and an ITA language training specialist, to design and teach a seminar which focused on addressing three pressing oral communication skills: formal oral

presentation, leading and participating in whole-class discussions and job interviewing. In addition, in order to enhance the students' theoretical and pedagogical awareness, we incorporated readings on World Englishes, English as an International Language, and second language (L2) Identity throughout the seminar.

In the seminar, the students were required to fulfill the following requirements: (1) complete an annotated bibliography based on their assigned weekly readings, (2) keep a weekly reflective journal based on their classroom readings, discussions, and/or tutorials, (3) give three five minutes oral presentations, and (4) participate in two individual tutorials (thirty minutes per session).

2.3. Research Participants

A total of eight TESOL graduate students (six NNES graduate students and two NES graduate students) participated in the course. They were one non-degree, three masters', and four doctoral students and were from different cultural backgrounds such as China, Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, and the U.S. For the present study, we focus on only the six NNES students in the seminar. Table 1 below provides the background information of the research participants.

2.4. Data Collection and Data Analysis

The data were collected from Spring 2005 and through Winter 2006. Multiple data collection methods were used to triangulate various data sources and perspectives (the faculty and students) at various stages during the study. For the present paper, however, we will focus on the results obtained

Table 1
 Participants' Background Information

Name	Country	Rank
Kaori	Philippines	1 st year, MA
Yoo	Taiwan	2 nd year, MA
Liu	China	2 nd year, M.A.
Min	South Korea	1 st year, Ph.D.
Cheng	Taiwan	2 nd year, Ph.D.
Ling	Taiwan	2 nd year, Ph.D.

from mid-course student interviews, students' weekly reflection papers and their annotated bibliographies, and researchers' field notes.

The collected data were reviewed for key themes and patterns by constantly categorizing, grouping, and clustering the data according to varying criteria (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Then, they were compared with general themes derived from the existing literature.

3. Findings

3.1. Research Question 1: How did the collaborative language-focused seminar help NNES TESOL students' professional and academic oral proficiency?

To answer our first research question, we looked at the data collected through the participants' reflection papers and researchers' field notes. Here, we will discuss two key oral proficiency skills we focused on during the seminar: presentation skills and interviewing skills. The description of each session and the responses from students are presented after a brief introduction of the need analysis results.

3.1.1. Presentation Skills

Through the initial need analysis prior to the class, NNES students identified formal oral presentation as the second most difficult oral communication skills and the most important one for their academic and professional success. Given the needs, we assigned multiple sessions to improve their presentation skills. We discussed skills and strategies that are necessary for giving effective presentations and responding to questions. In two class sessions, students had opportunities to practice their presentations and received feedback from the three instructors and peers through the two 5-minute presentations in class during Week 3 and Week 7. In addition to in-class feedback, each student had two approximately 30-minute one-on-one tutorial session with the ITA language training specialist to discuss their individual presentation and pronunciation issues. For the last presentation, each student chose from the two previous presentations followed by self-evaluation, peer and instructor feedback, and a guest lecturer

who we invited to give student presenters feedback and recommendations for future presentations.

Every student made significant progress and seemed to gain confidence from presenting. Time management was still an issue for many presenters but most of them were better at it and even some felt comfortable about not being able to cover everything they had planned, and they concluded their presentations smoothly:

I guess there is more progress for me to make regarding how to make my speech more concise.

I haven't completed my presentation but I feel more confident. (Cheng, reflection paper)

Most students showed confidence during their presentations by building a good rapport with the audience. They exhibited a good control of managing slides, speech, and gestures. They have improved use of technology and an awareness of appropriate choice of technology.

I feel that my presentation was clearer because of the overhead I used this time, and the evaluator is right- next time it might be more effective to use power point instead of having so many individual visuals. I think having so many visuals to show manually took up more of time than clicking a button for Power Point (Kaori, reflection paper)

The only one who didn't seem to necessarily see his improvement was Min, who exhibited nervousness or discomfort, «Torture again» to use his own words. But later he shared in his reflection paper about the positive learning in the session:

The last presentation gave me the same nervousness as that of the first presentation. However, in spite of all these uncomfortable experiences, this course has provided me with practical academic and professional oral language communications skills. (Min, reflection paper)

Students in the class seemed to be surprised and impressed by their peers' improvement during the presentations. In their responses in class and on reflection papers, many mentioned how each presenter looked more confident, comfortable, and professional. For example, when Yoo completed her presentation in time, other students gave her big applause because they remembered her frustration about not being able to finish up her presentation in the previous presentation with the same topic.

I found that most of us made some changes on our original presentations. I think we made the changes primarily due to the urge to improve our performance on the basis of Susan's suggestions at the tutorials as well as the desire to avoid making our audience feel bored. (Cheng, reflection paper)

It's obvious to see everybody has made so much improvement for the last presentation today!» (Liu, reflection paper)

Through the mid-course student interview in Week 5, students mentioned the effectiveness of the videotaping and in-class feedback of their presentations and one-on-one tutorials. One student said, «...[T]hey are empowering, encouraging, and eye-opening. They give practical application of concepts from class; they let us see ourselves in action, our strengths and faults; they give focus for oral presentation».

3.1.2. Interviewing skills

NNES TESOL graduate students in the needs analysis reported interviewing skills as one of the important skills for their academic and professional success. Based on the initial needs analysis, we designated a class session about interviewing skills. We invited two guest speakers: a career counselor and a public school ESL teacher/ administrator. The guest speaker from the career center at the university addressed effective communication strategies in an academic job interview setting. Specific interview questions related to NNES TESOL graduate students and cross-cultural communication strategies were discussed throughout the session. The second speaker discussed a) principals' and parents' views on the important qualities of teachers, b) different kinds of job opportunities in K-12 settings related to ESL, c) job search strategies and processes in her school district.

All participants agreed in their weekly reflection papers that the sessions were informative and insightful. Many of them especially remarked on the interviewing skills session, saying it helped them to realize the importance of awareness of cross-cultural differences and effective cross-cultural communication strategies in an interview setting:

I was interested in her conversation with

Soonhyang about how cultural differences shape interviewee's and interviewers' expectation and perception. Interesting enough, Soonhyang intentionally produced clear articulation and showed less hand gestures, but that could result in two extremes of interpretation by interviews, assuming she was too uptight[in the view of a western context], or she was showing her profession [in the view of a Korean context]. I assume, the interpretation indeed depends on the frequency of interviewers' contact with people from different ethnic groups. Thus, that should also be part of the researching the company as homework (Yoo, reflection paper)

Another striking finding is that several students remarked on the good quality of the guest speakers' presentations. In reference to the first NNES guest speaker, Liu wrote:

I like her style of presentation, confident, informative and humorous. From her presentation today, I learned not only the information of interview skills she provided, but also her presentation skills. In fact, it's quite related to the issue of this course –English oral proficiency for academic purposes (Liu, reflection paper)

The quote notes that inviting a confident L2 speaker as a guest speaker provided TESOL graduate students with another opportunity to learn how to be a professional and confident speaker.

3.2. Research Question 2: How can the seminar facilitate NNES TESOL students to gain their theoretical and pedagogical perspectives with regard to oral proficiency in English?

To answer our second research question, we analyzed the participants' annotated bibliographies by focusing on their evaluation of the article and self-reflection vis-à-vis a particular article. For the present paper, we will focus on the participants' reactions to three articles which deal with pronunciation teaching pedagogies by Levis (2005), intelligibility by Field (2005), and pronunciation and identity by Golombeck and Jordan (2005) by highlighting their increased critical awareness regarding theoretical and pedagogical issues related to NNES oral proficiency, particularly, pronunciation.

3.2.1. Pronunciation Teaching Pedagogies

In his article, *Changing contexts and Shifting Paradigms in Pronunciation Teaching*, Levis (2005) points out a general lack of research which supports our teaching of pronunciation in TESOL. He also discusses two competing ideologies in teaching pronunciation in our field: the «nativeness principle,» which maintains that NNES should strive to speak like the natives, and the «intelligibility principle,» which emphasizes mutual understanding between interlocutors, and how pronunciation research has been influenced by these two principles.

The participants in the present study reacted to the article mainly as an L2 learner or EFL teacher. The following quote from Min, for example, indicates how the nativeness principle is deeply ingrained in him. For him, having nonnative pronunciation is like having a «Scarlet Letter» on him, which suggests that he perceives it as something shameful and an unerasable marker to the public. Furthermore, he refers to the «Critical Period Hypothesis» which proposes that «there is a limited period during which language acquisition can occur» (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 198) by saying that «...there is nothing you can do to improve your language proficiency» (annotated bibliography). So, as an NNES who had passed the so-called critical period, he feels pessimistic about improving his pronunciation, and perhaps it is too late for him to sound like a native speaker. However, as a teacher, Min has a more optimistic attitude toward his students as he said:

NNS students need to «imagine alternative identities.» As an alternative to nativeness, I still can put an emphasis on intelligibility in pronunciation teaching, concurrently helping students negotiate their alternative identities.

(Min, annotated bibliography)

It is interesting and puzzling as to why Min does not think that he too can have an alternative identity as an L2 learner. This contradiction may indicate Min's ambivalent feelings toward «alternative identities» for NNES students and for himself as Jenkins (2005) discusses the role of teacher attitudes and identity with regard to the feasibility of an ELF (English as a lingua franca). She maintains, «...ELF pronunciation will only be taken up if teachers themselves ultimately see an ELF identity as

providing their students with accents which will enhance rather than damage their future social and economic prospects internationally» (p. 542). Perhaps, for Min, asserting alternative identities as legitimate ones still remains as only a theory and lacks a convincing power to put it into practice.

Several students reflected on their own experience of teaching pronunciation as EFL teachers, and they felt that they too relied heavily on their intuition rather than research findings. Kaori, for example, stated:

I taught pronunciation in my short experience as an EFL teacher, and I am ashamed to admit that I too have made the mistake of relying on my intuition when choosing what pronunciation features to teach my students, without consulting the available research. (Kaori, annotated bibliography)

Similarly, Cheng shared her experience as an EFL teacher in Taiwan and noted the contextual variables as well as identity issues that need to be considered in teaching pronunciation.

After reading these studies I realize that my common sense intuition is by no means a valid basis for pronunciation teaching!

These are very important issue that every EIL/ESL/EFL teacher should be aware of and reflect on. There are so many layers of sociolinguistic factors and different ideologies involved in pronunciation teaching that affect NNES' identity, legitimacy, beliefs about accent... (Cheng, annotated bibliography)

These quotes clearly indicate the participants' increased awareness about the complexities involved in teaching pronunciation in multilingual contexts.

3.2.2. Intelligibility

The article by Field (2005) on intelligibility and the role of lexical stress was truly eye-opening for many students. In his study, Field examined how non-native listeners and native listeners perceive lexical stress, and how lexical stress affects intelligibility. His findings revealed that certain types of stress misplacement could impair intelligibility; and intelligibility was most affected when the stress of the word was shifted to the right as opposed to shifting the stress to the left. Students shared their personal experiences either as an L2 learner or as

an EFL teacher. Ling, for example, provided her reflection with regard to her lack of knowledge regarding the function of lexical stress.

Even though I have noticed that lexical stress would influence intelligibility before reading this article, I have never thought specific aspects of lexical stress would have different impact on intelligibility. As a language teacher, I have to admit that I do not have enough knowledge about the roles of lexical stress. I not only need to enhance my knowledge about lexical stress but also know how to put this knowledge into my teaching.

(Ling, annotated bibliography)

Min, on the other hand, critically assessed how he was taught in Korea and how it has negatively influenced his pronunciation.

Conventional Korean pronunciation teaching has centered on the discrete phonemes...In a tutoring session with [the ITA language training specialist], I learned that most of the pronunciation problems I had resulted from a misplaced lexical stress, not those of particular phonemes (e.g. PROficiency instead of proFIciency). With this respect, many of the Koreans and I have been victimized by deviant pronunciation teaching practices. This article gave me food for thought regarding an alternative way of pronunciation teaching. (Min, annotated bibliography, emphasis added)

3.2.3. Pronunciation and identity

The article, *Becoming «Black Lambs» Not «Parrots»: A Poststructuralist Orientation to Intelligibility and Identity* by Golomberg and Jordan (2005) is based on a case study of two MATESOL students from Taiwan in a pronunciation pedagogy class. It aims to explore how NNES students assert their identities as legitimate teachers of English. The authors suggest that it is important for NNES teachers to establish their legitimacy and credibility as teachers of English by imagining new identities which can be done through command of content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of student's needs, and knowledge of institutional demands.

Many students were inspired by the article, particularly how two MATESOL students negotiated

their identities as legitimate teachers of English but at the same time were also aware of the complexities that entail in the process. Yoo and Liu, for example, commented:

It is time for teachers to stop trying to be «parrots» who mimic speech of NS but instead be «black lambs» who will take forge a different and legitimate identity. (Yoo, annotated bibliography)

It is understandable that majority of the public still possess the admiration of native-like language ability (particularly pronunciation) due to their lack of interaction with other English speakers from Outer Circle nor exposure to EIL.

Therefore, as professional language instructors, we have to take on the responsibility to strengthen multi-competence to demonstrate our legitimacy. Furthermore, we need to appeal to more research findings to support our teaching practices, making us more powerful.

(Liu, emphasis added, annotated bibliography)

These comments indicate that the students perceive themselves not as the victims of the NS fallacy but as the agent for change by changing their self-perceptions and identities. Clearly, the students feel encouraged and inspired to challenge their assigned identity and assert their alternative identity.

4. Conclusion

The present paper reported findings about a collaborative language-focused seminar designed to improve NNES graduate students' oral proficiency. In order to assess the effectiveness of the seminar, we posed two research questions: (1) How can the seminar facilitate NNES TESOL students' development of academic and professional oral proficiency? And (2) How can the seminar facilitate NNES TESOL students to gain their theoretical and pedagogical perspectives with regard to oral proficiency in English? For the present study, we mainly analyzed the participants' comments during the mid-term evaluation interview, their reflection papers and annotated bibliographies.

The findings revealed that all participants significantly improved their oral proficiency and gained L2 confidence by having sufficient opportunities for practice through the class

presentations and in-class feedback and one-on-one tutorial sessions. In addition, they developed meta-awareness of their oral skills with regard to specific academic and professional tasks by reflecting on their participation in and outside of class.

The analysis indicates that clearly, the participants have increased their awareness regarding some core issues related to NS fallacy as well as the challenges faced by NNES professionals. Through classroom readings and discussions, some of the participants were able to «imagine» alternative identities while others still adhered to the NES model. We also saw that there are some contradicting views regarding what alternative identities are available to the participants themselves as teachers versus what is available to their students.

5. Implications

We draw the following implications based on our experimental collaborative language-focused seminar for NNES TESOL students. First, it is critical that NNES students are exposed to alternative discourses that challenge existing disempowering discourses in TESOL, through which they can explore and imagine alternative identity communities. Hence, readings that deal with World Englishes, Teaching English as an International Language, interventions to empower NNES professionals should be a part of their required readings in their TESOL programs. These readings and classroom discussions will facilitate a paradigm shift not only among NNES students but also NS students and teacher educators themselves.

Furthermore, to buttress the paradigm shift in their theoretical awareness, practical components have to be incorporated into TESOL programs as shown in our collaborative language-focused seminar. In addition to open discussion on NNES issues, it is essential for TESOL programs to expand their educational responsibility by incorporating language training components into their curriculum to enhance NNES TESOL students' successful oral proficiency, a significant characteristic of quality language teachers and a seemingly big concern among them (Kim, 2004). Without resolving the issue, NNES TESOL students are not likely to feel empowered as confident English teachers.

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