

GLCA: Teaching Writing to Multilingual International Students in a Small Liberal Arts Setting, College of Wooster, November 1-3, 2019
Inclusive Classrooms and Student Agency Module, *Dr. Tamara Stasik*

3. Faculty or Student Activity: Natives and Shibboleths

Exercise 1: What it means to be a native speaker

“Native speaker status is often seen as the *sine qua non*, automatically bestowing authenticity and credibility on a teacher as an English language expert or even as a teacher trainer. As an initial gatekeeping shibboleth, nativeness can assume primacy over pedagogic expertise or actual language competence in the ELT (English language teaching) enterprise.”

(Nyar, 1998: 287, qtd in Jennifer Jenkins, 2015, p.124).

This quotation engages with two issues in English language teaching-- the idea of nativeness and the idea of gatekeeping. Both are involved with the ideas of Standard English, proficiency, prescriptive language teaching, and social capital.

Faculty Activity/Student Activity:

What does it mean to be a native-speaker? What are the assumptions, beliefs, and privileges bestowed to this (imagined) position? Unpack what nativeness means, and other associated terms in your field, or in American or home cultures.

For example, how is this concept used in cultural geography, linguistics, sociology, computer science etc).

For example, L2 international students in the U.S. may often use the term “Native American” to refer to a first-language English speaker in the U.S., and be unaware of the definitions of nativeness regarding the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Student Activity:

As an in-class activity or take-home assignment, have students search the internet for “native speaker” videos, and discuss their findings: what do they have in common, what are the operating assumptions? What critiques do they have about the videos regarding approach, content, or messaging? This activity can be developed into a longer project where each student formally analyzes a video, its implicit and explicit messages regarding native speakers.

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Exercise 2: The Shibboleth as gatekeeper.

Many scholars have identified the socially constructed nature of what is called Standard English (SE), and yet academics hold tenaciously to the view that SE is a fixed benchmark that students must attain. “In the United States,” S. Nero clarifies, “those students who primarily speak and/or write varieties of English such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), CCE, Tex Mex, world Englishes (WE), or English as a Second Language (ESL)—language varieties deemed alternative—tend to have a harder time meeting the benchmark. In many cases, “alternative” is a euphemism for “deficient” or “missing the mark. The reality,” she argues, “is that the mark is constantly shifting by virtue of actual language use” (2010, p.146).

This narrow benchmark is often a Standard White English based on grammatical and rhetorical aspects regarded as “shibboleths,” or gatekeepers to academia. And only those who meet these rigid rules will pass, regardless of their actual abilities. This process establishes a elitism and power dynamic that joins the “assumptions we make about the people who speak a language to the language itself” and “assures those who are proficient in it [SE] a position of dominance” (p. 145).

Faculty Activity:

In discussion or writing consider: How might your discipline implicitly or explicitly use English language writing power relations? Are there invisible language issues (“shibboleths”) that mark someone in your class, discourse, or field? How is that conveyed to students?

Student Activity:

Either have students research the origins of the Hebrew word “shibboleth” or share the handout by Kemmer <http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~kemmer/Words/shibboleth> (also see handout in module).

What words have you observed that have been used as entry-points (“shibboleths”) into speaking like a “native”? Where has this happened?

E.g. Local pronunciations of Place names [Wuster vs Wooster, Toronto vs Tor-on-a]

E.g. Microsoft vs Amazon jargon in the workplace

E.g. One prominent product that permits this sort of “single sign-on,” as it’s called, is named “Shibboleth,” a software that helps determine whether you are who you say you are (<https://www.incommon.org/software/shibboleth/>).