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Language Education for Non-Native Speaker Language Teachers

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Abstract

For non-native speaker language teachers (NNSLT), that is, teachers who teach a language which is not their own first language, one very important skill is competence in the target language. However, the development and maintenance of language skills are often neglected in language teacher training for language teachers. It is assumed that the trainees have already reached the requisite level of competence prior to entry into teacher training programmes, or that the general language courses available to them are sufficient in addressing these language needs. In this paper I argue for the introduction of a new area of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) to deal with the language skills needed by this learner group. I examine the literature relating to language for non-native speaker language teachers and review research in the teaching of language to NNSLTs. I describe a language course designed specifically for the education of non-native speaker teachers of English at a German university. Questionnaires, surveys and pre- and post-testing methods were used to evaluate the course. The study's results suggest that the LSP approach is both feasible and successful in improving student teachers' language skills for the purposes of teaching.

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Introduction

This article discusses how the language competence of non-native speaker language teachers (NNSLTs) can be supported in the education of pre-service language teachers. Cook outlines a number of advantages that NNSLTs have over their native speaker (NSLTs) counterparts but notes that the advantages are predicated on the non-native speaker who can speak fluently and communicate

within the classroom (Cook, 2005). Medgyes (1992; 1999) notes that the NNSLT provides an imitable model for her/his learners, can provide more information about the workings of the language taught and can anticipate language difficulties. These advantages are also contingent on the NNSLT's high proficiency in the target language as well as a high level of metalinguistic knowledge and target language awareness. Although it is noted that '[t]arget language skills of student teacher in the foreign language classroom have been considered a prerequisite for effective language teaching' (Tüzel and Akcan, 2009), Cullen (1994: 163) asserts that 'in most parts of the world the main emphasis in English language teacher training [...] is on methodology, and that the teacher's proficiency in the language itself is largely taken for granted'. This article outlines the small body of research into the NNSLT with particular emphasis on the language proficiency and education of that group. It presents a grammar course offered to pre-service German-speaking teachers of English where the content and teaching methodological approach were designed specifically for NNSLTs. The findings presented suggest that this approach was successful in improving the student teachers' language skills for the purposes of teaching and their attitudes toward their teaching.

Language and the non-native speaker language teacher
Research on the study of non-native speaker language teachers has been growing steadily since the first articles were published in the 1990s (Cullen, 1994; Medgyes, 1992; Medgyes, 1994; Reves and Medgyes, 1994). A small but growing body of research examines specifically the language of the NNSLT. In this section, the language proficiency needed in order to be a successful NNSLT will be discussed. It will be argued that we lack a clear definition of this level of proficiency and therefore an understanding of the language learning needs of NNSLTs in training. Perceptions of NNSLTs with regard to their language proficiency are then outlined, especially how deficiency in language skills may have detrimental effects on NNSLTs' self-image as well as on their learners' perceptions of them. There have been a number of studies regarding the provision of language education for NNSLTs and these will be discussed below.

Required language proficiency
Exactly what level of language proficiency is required to be an effective non-native speaker language teacher is unclear. In a discussion of a vocabulary course for NNSLTs of English, Medgyes (1999: 179) indicates his stance on the language needs of this group. He is convinced that 'for NNS English teachers to be effective, self-confident, and satisfied professionals, first, we have to be near-native speakers of English'. It is not clear what is meant by near-native proficiency. Does it mean that NNSLT of English needs to know lexical items such as 'ungular' and every obscure word in the target language, as Medgyes (ibid: 180) seems to suggest? If so, then the eternal chasing of the near-native illusion could be equally as unattainable, and consequently disheartening and demoralising for NNSLTs as striving for native speaker status.

Cullen (2001: 28) describes teacher language proficiency from another perspective, claiming that a 'poor or hesitant command' of the language will negatively affect classroom teaching procedures and 'a limited command' of the language will impact other areas of a teacher's life. This may be the case but the

terms are still vague and unhelpful in their description of a teacher's language needs. Can it be assumed that a teacher must have good, unwavering and unlimited command of the target language to be successful? Given the lack of clarity around the required level of proficiency for NNSLT, it is unsurprising that nearly half of the NNS TESOL student respondents answered 'not sure' when asked if they themselves had the English proficiency to be a truly qualified teacher (Liu 1999). A better understanding of exactly what is needed to claim NNSLT proficiency would be useful to teacher educators for training purposes and to provide the teachers themselves with the confidence they need in their own skills.

It is recognised that both NSLTs and NNSLTs experience language difficulties but that the 'command of language gains importance as the prior concern that threatens non-native teachers' security and efficacy' (Tüzel and Akcan 2009: 272). Llurda (2005: 146) proposes that a teacher's insufficient language skills might affect their teaching methodology in that he or she 'may eventually feel much more comfortable in a teacher-fronted text-book oriented class'. While it is not necessarily the case that NNSLTs need native-like language proficiency, it seems to be the case that NNSLTs are conscious of their potential language deficiencies, and these need to be addressed. Otherwise the NNSLT may be ill-equipped to implement language teaching methodologies prescribed in the curriculum.

Medgyes (1999) acknowledges the limited time available to teacher training courses and the urgency of NNSLTs' language needs. It is never possible or practical to teach all of the foreign language and some discretion must be exercised. To call for near-native proficiency, which must encompass all aspects of the language, without analysing the actual needs of the teachers as learners could result in time wasted on learning irrelevant vocabulary and structures at the expense of more useful language. A more learner-focused approach that specifically addresses the particular needs of the language teacher may be useful where a teacher education programme must deal with time constraints.

Perceptions of non-native speaker language teachers
Studies regarding the perceptions of non-native speaker language teachers represent a large proportion of research in this area. Investigations on NNSLTs' self-image are discussed in this section and it is shown that teachers are often anxious regarding their language proficiency. Studies of learner perceptions of NNSLTs are also briefly outlined and it is shown that learners perceive both positive and negative attributes.

Medgyes (1994) concludes from his studies of NNSLT that this group suffers from an 'inferiority complex' as a result of their inadequate command of the language they are employed to teach. The TESOL students who studied using a 'NNST Imposter Scale' (Bernat, 2008) were also anxious regarding their perceived inferiority compared with NSs, and were concerned about their potential disadvantage in terms of employment. This group also felt anxiety regarding the fact that their learners would expect a native speaker. However, NNSLTs are often presumed to have superior knowledge of grammar to their native speaking colleagues. That the NNSLT perceives this to be true has been demonstrated in studies by Medgyes (1994), and Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999). A study of Japanese teachers of English and their perceptions of NNS

English teaching assistants showed that correct grammar knowledge and use was favoured over native-like pronunciation (Shibata, 2010).

In a survey of over 400 Hungarian students of English, Benke and Medgyes (2005) found that students acknowledge the advantages of having a non-native speaker of English to teach their classes. Confirming the teachers' perceptions as outlined above, students claimed 'that NNS teachers have a more structured approach to teaching grammar and are better able to deal with grammatical difficulties, 'can provide better exam preparation', and 'can use the L1 to ease problems of comprehension and translation' (ibid: 206). Learners' positive perceptions of NNSLTs in certain aspects of language teaching were also demonstrated in the Spanish context. It was shown that the NNSLT's ability to teach learning strategies was most consistently identified as a strong point, followed by their ability to take advantage of the L1 and their more extensive knowledge and understanding of grammar (Lasagabaster and Sierra 2005). While 60% of respondents stated that they would prefer to be taught by NSLTs over NNSLTs, over 70% claimed they would rather be taught by both when they were given this option in the survey. This again demonstrates that there are perceived differences between NNSLTs and NSLTs but that learners are able to recognise the relative merits of each.

Language provision for language teachers
A number of recent publications deal with the provision of language as a component of the education of non-native speaker language teachers in various contexts. These outline concrete examples of training opportunities as well as suggestions for the development of courses designed specifically with the enhancement of pre-service teachers' language skills in mind. Various researchers advocate a range of different types of content for language courses for pre-service language teachers. Shin (2008) notes that student teachers in the American TESOL context need to be provided with training in English for classroom use as well as pragmatics and intercultural skills. This is due to the fact that the student teachers are resident in the L2 context and language courses should assist them in both their professional and personal lives. Liu (1999: 206) claims that the language provision in TESOL programmes is inadequate as it deals with the explicit knowledge of grammar and syntax. The programme described by Barnes (2002) includes independent language learning, language diagnostics, a needs analysis of the NNSLTs' language and language refreshment. Her study discusses language provision for teachers of modern foreign languages in the British context and describes the course offered to the postgraduate students studying for teaching qualifications. Research concerning course content for NNSLTs offers varying and sometimes conflicting opinions of what this content should be.

Cullen (2001) illustrates the use of lesson transcripts as a basis for a NNSLT trainee language class, his example being for the purpose of teaching questioning in the classroom. This method combines pedagogical training with language improvement in that the trainees are encouraged to become aware of the use of questions for teaching purposes, and to use question forms more fluently and confidently. As part of a course designed to raise the language awareness of pre-service NNSLTs, Tűzel and Ackan (2009) performed classroom observations which formed the basis of collaborative feedback sessions,

discussions and retrospective protocols. The course in language awareness was deemed successful in building the teachers' confidence and it was concluded that courses in language teacher awareness should be integrated into language teacher training programmes. Medgyes (1999: 191) questions the use of communicative language teaching methods for the improvement of NNSLTs' language skills, claiming that the future foreign language teacher's needs 'are far more urgent than those of an ordinary language learner' so that the pre-service teacher's language training may need to be more focussed.

These examples of language teaching for language teachers demonstrate the interest in the area but also the lack of cohesion. The approach to teaching language to NNSLTs varies greatly depending on context and an inclusive theoretical underpinning is lacking. Both the content and methodology of language courses for language teachers vary widely in the research on language teaching for language teachers.

Research context
An English grammar course designed specifically for pre-service German speaking teachers of English is detailed in this section. The course described took place at the University of Magdeburg, Germany. The English programme at the Institute of Foreign Language Philologies catered for, at the time (2007-2009), students pursuing an academic degree (*Magister*) as well as those studying to become second level language teachers (*Lehramt*). The student teachers and academic students took the same courses, except for didactics and teaching methodology courses, which only student teachers attended. Literature, linguistics, culture and language courses were common to both groups. Courses were not graded but students were awarded a certificate of completion (*Schein*) on satisfying course requirements. These requirements generally included regular attendance and active participation, as well as a presentation, homework assignments, or an essay. Language classes were taught at an advanced level using a communicative approach but no formal grammar classes were offered, though grammar issues were dealt with as they arose. It was in this context that a group of student teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with the language courses they were offered. This group found that the advanced classes did not take into account their specific needs as student teachers. The group was particularly concerned with its lack of explicit grammar knowledge; they were mostly correct in their use of tenses, for instance, but were not always sure why and were unable to explain their choice to others. The group requested a grammar course specific to their needs.

The course
The students had requested a course which concentrated on improving their grammar skills for their future careers as language teachers, where they would not only need to understand the forms and their use explicitly but also to be able to describe and explain these forms to their own pupils. Students had expressed anxiety regarding their grammar knowledge in that they would lose face should one of their learners ask them a grammar question and that they were unable to answer. The method for teaching grammar also needed to serve the learner group in question. The students were taught theories of language teaching in

their didactics and methodology classes, and it would be important that as educators, practised what we preached, so to speak.

The first consideration in planning this grammar course was choosing the individual phenomena that should be taught. In this case, the students themselves had already demonstrated a sense of awareness of their own needs, a sense of responsibility for ameliorating problems they had, and the ability to critically reflect on their learning. As a result, it was seen to be appropriate that the students would choose the content of the course; they were best positioned to know their needs and allowing the students to direct their learning would promote learner autonomy. On the first day of class, the students engaged in a brainstorming session to find the group's collective understanding of the most difficult grammar structures. Ideas and suggestions were provided by the teacher but the choice was ultimately the students'. The group then, in conjunction with the teacher, identified the most popular areas of difficulty, and developed an outline plan for the 14-week course.

The course was offered four times over two semesters. Students were required to take a set number of language courses during their studies but were able to decide themselves which courses these would be (other choices included Oral Communication, Reading and Speaking, and Writing) and when they would take them. The students were in advanced stages of their studies with two thirds of the group having completed six semesters or more. Many of the students had also spent time abroad. The students' language proficiency was therefore generally high especially in terms of speaking skills. Grammar errors tended, according to some informal conversations with the students, to be fossilizations due to repetition without formal correction.

Each lesson dealt with a different grammar structure. The exceptions were the first and last week when the planning, review, and testing took place. Each week, the students were asked to revise the structure in question and to imagine how they might explain this form to their learners. They were also asked to think of activities that would be suitable for demonstrating the form. Each lesson comprised three phases. In the first phase, a student or group of students was asked to explain the form to their classmates in the most precise way possible in English. Their fellow students could request clarification and offer constructive criticism of the explanations put forward, and any outstanding ambiguity was addressed by the teacher. In the second phase, the class was engaged in activities prepared by the teacher which helped to consolidate their knowledge of the use of the form as well as provide ideas for the teaching of the form in their own school contexts. These exercises were often taken from publications (Hadfield, 1987; Rinvolucri, 1984; Ur and Swan, 2009) or were the teacher's own invention or adaptations and included games, role play and information gap exercises that required the structure in question to be used in order to complete the task. The use of drill exercises was avoided. Lastly, the students critiqued the activities they had experienced during the lesson and discussed their relative merits in relation to the second level school contexts where they would be teaching in the future. The students also presented the activities they themselves had found for the purpose of demonstrating the grammar form, and the group evaluated and discussed these. This gave the students the opportunity to further reflect on the structure in question. The methods used in class were relevant to the student teachers' future careers. The

content was grammar but the focus was on the contextual use of forms, and the explicit understanding and explanation of the phenomena, knowledge that the students had indicated they would need, and felt they lacked, for the purposes of teaching.

Literature regarding the non-native speaker language teacher has demonstrated that language proficiency plays an important role in effective teaching (see, for example, Cook, 1999, 2005; Levis, Sonsaat and Link, 2016; Riordan, 2015). This course aims to specifically address the language deficiencies relating to their language use for teaching purposes identified by the learners themselves. As a means of gauging the students' improvement regarding their grammar knowledge, they were tested on the first and last days of the course. The test was a simple gap-fill test with 25 grammar points. The sentences were intended to be as unambiguous as possible and to contain typical tense markers or other indicators that would make obvious the requirement for a certain form. The forms tested were ones that had shown themselves, in the teacher's experience, to be difficult for this specific learner group. The pre-test was administered on the first day to get a clear idea of the students' current grammar proficiency. The test results were given to the students the following week and they were allowed to view their papers but not to keep them. This was to allow the students to know their own starting level but to discourage them from focussing too much on the test. The post-test was administered on the last day of term. This test was identical to the pre-test in terms of the structures that it examined but the questions were worded differently to avoid the possibility that the student teachers would recall the answer based on the lexical cues. However, as it had been 13 weeks since the students had viewed that test and then only for a short time, it was felt that the post-test would give an accurate depiction of their post-course grammar proficiency in comparison to the pre-test. Since the tests assessed the same structures, it was also possible to compare the two for purposes of course evaluation and for the students themselves to evaluate their own progress. Tests were administered in four of the courses with a total of 56 student teachers. Only the results from student teachers who completed both the pre-test and the post-test have been included for analysis (N=44).

Results

Students were asked to complete an open-response questionnaire containing six questions. They were invited to comment on the effect that the course had on their language skills and also on their teaching as a result of this. This questionnaire was distributed in four courses. The completion of the questionnaire was not obligatory, and the student teacher respondents were not asked to provide their name. Questions were given in English; however, students were informed that they could answer in English or German. A total of 23 questionnaires were collected from the four groups which represents a response rate of 41%. The comments provided were coded and the results are described in the following section. Students were also invited to complete an interim review of the course in its seventh week and were asked to reflect on their own progress as well as their perceptions of the course. This was not compulsory and there was a low response rate, with only five students having written any substantial reflection. Pre- and post-tests, closed-response departmental

questionnaires, and open-response feedback surveys were analysed to investigate whether the course had fulfilled its aims and to demonstrate that the use of a teaching approach that addressed the pre-service teachers' particular needs was successful.

Language improvement
Figure 9 shows the mean and standard deviation of the test results attained by the four class groups who were tested (N=44). Only the results of those students who completed both the pre-test and the post-test have been included in the analysis of test results shown.

Course	Pre-test	Post-test	Improvement
1 (n= 10)	50.8	81.2	30.4
2 (n=13)	59.7	80	20.3
3 (n=10)	60.4	87.2	26.8
4 (n=11)	64.8	87.6	22.8
Total (N=44)	58.9	84	25

Figure 9: Averages of pre-tests and post-tests

The average score in the pre-test is just under 59% for the four class groups. The highest score in the pre-test was 88%, and the lowest was 32%. The mean post-test score was just under 84%, and the highest post-test score was 100% (achieved by three students) and the lowest score was 56%. This means that the overall improvement was just under 25%. Student comments support these results with statements such as:

> *Ich denke mehr über die Grammatik nach und komme etwas durcheinander.*

> I think more about the grammar and become somewhat confused.

The low scores on the pre-test showed a lack of explicit grammar knowledge among the class groups, consistent with the students' self-evaluations. This indicates a need for grammar courses for these student teachers. The improvement in score in the post-test was substantial and consistent across all four groups included in this study. This indicates that this 14-week course in grammar which focused specifically on teachers' needs substantially improved their grammar knowledge.

Teaching practice
Figure 10 shows the results of the question 'Do you think this course will help your teaching in the future? If yes, please names three specific ways it will help.' All of the students asked responded positively to the question (n=23) and the responses were categorised. Figure 10 shows the most common response themes. Over half of the students mentioned that the course had shown them new ways of teaching (n=13) and 35% noted that the course showed them ways to motivate their own learners (n=8). It should be noted that the course did not deal directly with teaching methodology so that ideas for teaching came from the

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students' direct experience of activities as learners. In addition, 13% of the students asked (n=3) stated that they were able to evaluate teaching techniques having done/used them in class themselves. A student review of the course illustrates this point:

> *Ich finde es wichtig Übungen, die wir später beim Unterrichten einsetzen wollen, mal selbst auszuprobieren. So bekommt man nicht nur ein Gefühl für die Zeitspanne die das Spiel benötigt, sondern man merkt auch für welche Klassen man bestimmte Spiele einsetzen kann.*

> I find it important to try out ourselves the exercises that we want to use in class in the future. In this way one not only gets an idea for the period of time that the game requires but one also realises which classes one can use a specific game in.

Comment type	No. of respondents
New ways of teaching	13
Improved own grammar	11
Know where to find resources	8
Can motivate own learners	8
Can create interesting courses	4
Have seen which activities are good	3
Able to explain grammar in TL	2

Figure 10: Response types and number of respondents to the question 'Do you think this course will help your teaching in the future? If yes, please names three specific ways it will help'

 The practical application of the teaching methods taught in didactics and methodology classes were reinforced and new insight achieved through the students' own experience of the activities. One student noted this in his feedback:

> It became clear that also students of English keep grammar, for example the correct use of the tenses, in their minds, if there is an action-orientated approach. That's why I think the concept of the course works.

This language course designed specifically for pre-service language teachers is an opportunity for student teachers to experience first-hand the types of language learning activities that they might use in their own classes. Students also seemed to perceive an improvement in their teaching skills in that 87% of them agreed or strongly agreed with the statement *Meine praktische Faehigkeiten sind nach der Lehrveranstaltung gestiegen* ['My practical skills were higher after the course'] in a departmental questionnaire regarding the course. However, only 9% (n=2, see Figure 10) mentioned explaining grammar in answer to the question 'Do you think this course will be helpful for your teaching in the future?' in the open-response survey. The explanation of grammar did

seem to be a cause for some reflection for the students, as evidenced in statements such as:

> *Durch den Kurs sammelt man viele Ideen und merkt erst mal, dass es gar night so einfach ist anderen Menschen eine Zeitform moeglichst genau und ohne viele Worte zu erklaeren.*

> Through the course, one collects many ideas and notices that it is not so easy to explain a tense to other people as precisely as possible and without too many words*.*

The use of the target language to explain grammar can be difficult for non-native speaker teachers and the opportunity to reflect on this may be beneficial for their teaching.

Conclusion
Language proficiency is an integral component of the non-native speaker language teacher's pre-service education but it is often neglected within training programmes. Research into the NNSLT shows that there is a lack of definition regarding the language competence NNSLTs need in order to be effective teachers. It has also been shown that the effects of NNSLT language deficiency can be detrimental to the teacher's self-image and confidence as well as to pupils' perceptions of the teacher. A number of studies carried out in various contexts describe the content and methodology that can be employed to service the pre-service NNSLTs' particular language needs. This study has outlined a grammar course designed for German-speaking student English teachers in a training programme in Germany. The course used a methodology relevant to the student teachers' future careers and addressed language issues relating to their specific needs as teachers. The results of pre- and post-testing showed a marked improvement in the student teachers' grammar skills as a result of this approach. Qualitative data demonstrated that the student teachers experienced a direct positive effect on their attitude toward their teaching. Similar approaches to language courses for pre-service language teachers may be useful in other teacher education contexts while an improved understanding of the language needs of non-native speaker language teachers would be of benefit to language teacher training.

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