



## What is the definition of a native speaker of English?

by Lim Soo Hwee

“Are you a native speaker of English?” I asked a couple of my colleagues who are Singaporean or Malaysian. “No” came the straight answer. No hesitation on the answer to the question at all. “But look at the dictionary’s definition of a native speaker,” I coaxed, and a lively discussion ensued.

The truth is that when we speak of a native speaker of English, the image of a Caucasian usually comes to mind, does it not? So does being a native speaker of English (meaning, being Caucasian) mean that one speaks and writes it well enough? A check on-line (e.g. [www.english-forums.com](http://www.english-forums.com)) showed that the topic of native speakers of English is alive and well. From the interesting exchanges I found, the “conclusion” one could draw is that clear and comprehensible English (competent, proficient), both spoken and written, is more important than whether one is a native speaker of English.

The word “native” is itself vague and has non-linguistic connotations that are not culturally and politically neutral. To talk about native and non-native speakers is to make an assumption or assumptions about natives and non-natives per se. The terms are perhaps unfortunate in a discussion of language as the etymology of “native” implies birth into a specific community or a particular place. In fact, cases where being born in a particular place automatically entails membership of a specific community and knowledge of a particular language are more the exception than the norm nowadays. I am a case in point. Though I was born into a family that speaks Hokkien (a southern Chinese dialect), I am not fluent enough to carry on a decent conversation in this dialect with my elders.

In Singapore where I was raised and educated, (almost) everyone who had been to school for a couple of years would be able to speak a smattering of English, aka Singlish, a hybrid of the words, Singapore and English. The issue of whether I was a native English speaker or not had never crossed my mind until the day I applied for an EMWA workshop on punctuation. I dithered for a while as to how to answer the question of whether I was a “native English speaker” and then circled “No”, since, being of Chinese descent, Chinese should be my first language. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (Oxford University Press 2000), a native speaker is “a person who speaks a language as their first language and has not learned it as a foreign language”. In essence, I never learned English as a foreign language but as a first language, right from the day I entered school. Everything except the pupils’ mother tongue was taught in English. Languages other than English or one’s mother tongue were considered “foreign languages”, which for the talented few were offered as a third language.

An enlightening local news article on Global English caught my eye recently. The article contained interesting quotes from English Next, a recent British Council report authored by applied linguist David Graddol ([www.british-council.org](http://www.british-council.org)). Because English is becoming the corporate language globally, the problem may increasingly be that “few native speakers belong to the community of lingua franca users; in fact, their presence hinders communication. As a result of such incomprehension, China now hires Belgian-trained English teachers who are valued because of their experience in bilingual education. Elsewhere in Asia, the definition of native-speaker teacher has been relaxed to include teachers from India and Singapore” (*The Sunday Times*, 12 March 2006, p30).

English has no doubt triumphed as *the* international language, be it in the area of business or in the field of science, but it is not necessarily the English of the core English-speaking nations nowadays. In China alone, an estimated 176.7 million people were studying English in 2005, and it is possible that in a few years there could be more English speakers in China than in India. This extraordinary expansion has blurred the distinctions between the “native speaker”, the “second language speaker” and the “foreign-language user” of English. In fact, many second language users have become as proficient as native speakers. In a few years, it is likely that the highly proficient English speakers will consist of more non-native speakers than native speakers from Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. With that, the reverence of native speakers as the gold standard for English is likely to decline in the years to come. A hundred years ago, it was still relevant to distinguish between native and non-native speakers of English. But in this day where the world is a global village and communication just a mouse-click away, this distinction is perhaps of less relevance.

With these thoughts I would like to extend the debate about the ideal qualifications for a medical writer. Before you consider whether you need an English native speaker for your open position of ‘medical writer’ the question to ask is “What is a native speaker of English?” Only after you have the answer to that question can you debate whether the applicant needs to be a native speaker of English. And after that we can start to worry about whether the preferred application should be a linguist or a scientist.

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