Non-Native Educators
in English Language Teaching

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CHAPTER 5

Textual Identities:
The Importance of Being Non-Native

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The controversy surrounding the respective privileges of native speakers and non-native speakers (see, for example, Kramsch, 1997) becomes moot when we deal with written language. For no one could argue that people are “born” into reading and writing; what Walter Ong has called “the technologizing of the word” (Ong, 1982) is foreign to both native and non-native speakers. Both have to be schooled into literacy and into certain types of academic literacy in order to use language in its written form. For both, the marks on the page have an opacity, a surplus of meaning that blurs the transparency of the spoken word, even if many adults have acquired the illusion that these paper traces are the exact replica of the way people speak. What distinguishes natives from non-natives is the degree of “foreignness” that the language displays when it is represented in writing, in print, or in electronic form.

What’s in a Foreign Text?

Consider the following text. In his Preface to The Order of Things, Foucault describes a passage in Borges that shattered, as he read it, “all the familiar landmarks of his thought.”

[A] “certain Chinese encyclopaedia” in which it is written that “animals are divided into: (1) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camel-hair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.” (Foucault, 1970, p. xv)

Foucault commented:
In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that (p. xv).

Now not every encounter with a foreign language text elicits the kind of laughter that seized Foucault upon reading Borges' Chinese text. But this example might help us reflect on the healthy defamiliarization that non-native readers experience in the presence of foreign texts. The passage above is written in standard English and is clear enough from an informational perspective. We can look up "sucking pigs" and "sirens" in the dictionary, and even gather background knowledge about Chinese emperors and Chinese embalming practices. But it still will not make this text less opaque to us. The passage is obviously about more than just the different animals, practices, and customs of a foreign society; it offers more than different names for its indigenous animals and things. What the text describes is a foreign way of ordering, classifying, and organizing the world through language. Puzzling are not the facts that are translatable, even though rather awkwardly, into English, but the logic of their representation on the printed page. The juxtaposition of stray dogs and sucking pigs, of the real, the fabulous, and the pictorial, is all the more incongruous to our way of thinking as it attempts to follow the logical, literate, order of our Western alphabet (a) through (n). It is as if the Borges text attempted to squeeze the logic of another people's words, written in a distant time and place, into the logic of our own—lighting a spark of poetic imagination together with the sudden realization that the world may not necessarily be the way we see it. Texts written in a foreign language may put our native world into question.

Written texts are repositories of other texts written for other purposes and other readerships. Borges quoted this "Chinese encyclopaedia" in Spanish to entertain his Argentinean readers, but Foucault requested it in French to illustrate for his French compatriots the problematic relationship of words to things. It is once again quoted here, this time in English, to illustrate the important role that non-nativeness might play in the teaching of textual competence in English. Every text bears the visible trace of history, of meanings both lost and gained in translation. Unlike everyday conversations subjected to the pressures of social decorum, texts can be reproduced, reread, cited, and annotated by every user. Because a majority of ESL and EFL learners learn English through texts of various sorts, it should be interesting to examine what role textuality plays in the native non-native relationship and what effect written language has on the development of a learner's social and cultural identity.

The Textual Identity of the Non-Native Speaker

In a widely cited article, Peirce (1995) described a study she conducted on recent immigrants at Ontario College in Newtown, Canada. After having taught a 6-month ESL course, Peirce went on to study five of the women participants over a period of 12 months. The women were asked to keep records of their interactions with anglophone Canadians and to write diaries in which they would reflect on their language learning experiences in the home, workplace, and community. The study also made use of written questionnaires and of individual and group interviews. Peirce found in the written testimonies evidence of a complex relation between social identity, personal investment, and language learning, and of the admirable ability of some of the women immigrants, such as Martina from the Czech Republic, to capitalize on their multiple identities to make their voices heard in Canadian society.

However, one important aspect of this study has been little commented upon: for a whole year, these women engaged in a highly literate reflection on themselves and their relation to the English language. The awareness of their multiple identities as immigrants, mothers, wives, workers, and learners, came to them through writing. Let us look, for example, at Martina's March 8, 1991, diary entry, as cited by Peirce:

The first time I was very nervous and afraid to talk on the phone. When the phone rang, everybody in my family was busy and my daughter had to answer it. After ESL course when we moved and our landlords tried to persuade me that we have to pay for whole year, I got upset and I talked with him on the phone over one hour and I didn't think about the tenses rules. I had known that I couldn't give up. My children were very surprised when they heard me. (1995, p. 22)

This diary entry not only describes the event but gives it a meaning that might be different from the one Martina experienced only confusedly at the moment. A telephone call experienced in a particular context acquires another logic when it gets languaged after the fact in a diary entry destined to be read by a researcher who had also been Martina's ESL teacher. This is not to say that Martina is not "telling the truth," only that her written text constructs, narrows down, clarifies, and focuses the truth of the event in quite a different manner than it was lived at the
time. An oral rendition of the same story might have also put the accents quite differently from what we now see on the page.

For example, the coordinating conjunction between the two clauses “I talked with him on the phone over one hour and I did not think about the tenses rules” effectively juxtaposes and links pragmatic need (first clause) and formal grammar (second clause), the rules of political power and the rules of linguistic usage, Martina as tenant and Martina as learner of English. In essence, what Martina’s text states is: “Although my use of past tenses is mostly correct in this diary entry, tenses didn’t really matter in my altercation with my landlord. ESL courses might be as important in helping you stand up to your landlord as in teaching you the rules of the English language.” What is interesting is that Martina voices here in near correct English the futility of English grammar and widens English grammar to denounce the abuses made by landlords through the medium of English grammar. Indeed, apart from the incorrect “I had known,” her diary entry makes skillful use of English syntax to interpret her experience and impose that interpretation on the researcher.

To cite another example, the choice of information structure in the sentence—positive information (“I talked with him on one hour”) followed by negative information (“and I didn’t think about the tenses rules”)—is a choice made by Martina as a writer, who thereby manages to highlight her pride in her achievement in such a way that the reader cannot but interpret the “and” as a concessive (“in spite of the fact that”) rather than as an additive conjunction. Had she written “I talked with him on the phone over one hour, but my English grammar was incorrect because I was so upset,” the reader might interpret Martina’s entry not as a triumphant feat of self-assertion but as a failure to live up to the standards set by her ESL teacher. By crafting her English sentences the way she did, Martina crafted a self she would live by in the real world of landlords, employers, and bureaucrats. Indeed, the interpretation given by Peirce of the exchange between Martina and her landlord relies among other things on the implicit causal link expressed by the information structure of Martina’s diary entry. Peirce writes: “Martina had to [defend the family’s rights against unscrupulous social practices] . . . regardless of her command of the English tense system” (1995, p. 22, our emphasis). The use of regardless here picks up on the implicature entailed by Martina’s and in her diary entry.

We would like to argue that writing was a decisive factor in the way Martina got a handle on the events of her life in Canada. By representing lived experience in the public form of a diary for the benefit of the researcher, Martina developed a social persona that evidently enabled her to assert herself in Canadian society (see, for instance, Luke, 1996). This self-representation is not a natural process of familiarization with the spoken style of native speakers; it is associated with the highly self-conscious, rhetorical use of the foreign language by a non-native who, by appropriating for herself a language she views as foreign, actualizes or paper a social reality that was only potentially there. Martina’s experience is similar in this regard to that of Rodriguez, who writes in Hunger of Memory (1992) that “I became a man by becoming a public man” (p. 7) . . . I sit here in silence writing this small volume of words, and it seems to me the most public thing I ever have done . . . I am making my personal life public” (p. 177). Like Rodriguez, it is by creating a textual identity for herself that Martina develops the social and personal identity necessary to survive in the new country.

Of course, the power of the written word to change attitudes and mind-sets is not inherent in the English language. One could argue that Martina’s written narrative seems to echo prior narratives of individual self-assertion and survival in the face of societal odds—heroic narratives that are all too familiar to native speakers of English raised on The Little Engine that Could and later on Star Wars. By writing, and thus imposing meaning and value on a multifarious and often contradictory flow of experienced events, Martina, one could argue, fails prey to the dominant belief, very often expressed through the English language, in the ability of the individual to change herself and others through sheer moral determination and free will. Writing is no insurance against conformity to a dominant ideology.

But, then, the English language is also the language of less individualistic, heroic narratives like those of Salman Rushdie, Wyole Soyinka, or Chinua Achebe, who write English counternarratives of sorts. These and other non-native writers stretch the limits of the sayable in the foreign tongue. For example, the immigrant Italian writer Gino Chiellino, writing in German in Germany, is eloquent about the increasing number of foreign writers in Germany:

Perhaps these authors write in German because they need to find another “German” language, a language not available in contemporary German, in order to write about what they experience in the foreign culture. This point seems to be quite significant; much more so than secondary literature or criticism have been willing or able to recognize (1995, p. 44) . . . It is only by maintaining his or her difference that the foreign author writing in German can contribute to displacing the German language. [Comment by my German editor: according to the
dictionary, ‘to dislocate’ is to ‘radically disrupt.’ Surely that is not a desirable goal. I suggest ‘contribute to extending the boundaries of national goals’] (p. 28).

What writing can do is hold together, without resolving it, the fundamental tension inherent in the non-native writing condition: the adherence to correct English usage and the refusal to abide by any one “correct” norm of use. The building of textual homes is not given with the mastery of the English syntax; it is a subversive art, to be acquired and developed.

Building Textual Homes

Martina’s languaging experience as a diary writer is eventually the stuff that literature is made of, especially literary works written by poets and novelists who write in a language that is foreign to them. In her widely acclaimed autobiography Lost in Translation (1989), the Polish immigrant to Canada Eva Hoffman writes about the potential generative powers of the foreign language diary. Caught in the dilemma between writing in Polish—“the language of [her] untranslatable past,” and English—the language of her current school exercises, she finally opts for English.

If I’m to write about the present, I have to write in the language of the present, even if it’s not the language of the self . . . The diary is an earnest attempt to create a part of my persona that I imagine I would have grown into in Polish. In the solitude of this most private act, I write, in my public language, in order to update what might have been my other self. The diary is about me and not about me at all . . . I learn English through writing, and, in turn, writing gives me a written self . . . For a while, this impersonal self, this cultural negative capability, becomes the truest thing about me. When I write, I have a real existence that is proper to the activity of writing—an existence that takes place midway between me and the sphere of artifice, art, pure language. This language is beginning to invent another me. (p. 121)

This “me” is quite different from that of a familiar user of the language, unless that user has consciously defamiliarized his or her own language, as poets are wont to do. The experience of foreignness, of what Bakhtin called “outsideness” or “transgredience,” is so much a condition of creativity (Holquist, 1990, p. 26) that some writers even tend to cultivate it as a kind of voluntary linguistic exile.

Voluntary exile? Does not this sound like a contradiction in terms? True, according to the dictionary, exile means “punishment or expulsion from one’s native land by authoritative decree” and can therefore hardly be voluntary. And yet, this apparent contradiction might reveal the potential of written language for being a kind of third place, a “fierce place” (Serres, 1991, p. 78), that non-native speakers can create to express meanings not usually found under the pen of native writers. For example, a non-native writer might write about exile and not mean involuntary expulsion but rather a conscious refusal to take roots, a creative need for distance from both one’s native language and the foreign tongue as it is used by native speakers. Sebbar described this exile as follows:

If I speak of exile, it is the only place from where I can speak the contradictions, the division . . . the cultural crossings; I live, I write, in these points of juncture or disjuncture, so how could I decline a simple identity . . . I am a French writer, with a French mother and an Algerian father, and the topics of my books are not my identity; they are the signs of my history as a hybrid, as a mestizo, obsessed by the surrealist encounter of the Other and the Same, by the cross . . . between tradition and modernity, between East and West. (Sebbar & Huston, 1986, p. 126; our translation)

About her diary writing, she writes: “Here is for me, and without my having neither sought it nor provoked it . . . the tangible, concrete, materially voluptuous sign of exile.” (Sebbar & Huston, 1986, p. 9; our translation). Some non-native writers of English, like the Irishman Joyce or the Nigerian Soyinka, express their own “exiled” perspective by stretching English lexicon and syntax to the limits of the intelligible.

A third place is thus an eminently relational concept, suspended between irreconcilable polarities. It is carved out here by the creative act of writing. Hoffman describes this place as the awareness that comes from the double tension between the standard English idiom spoken by native speakers and her writing in that language:

Refractions through the double distance of English and writing, this self—my English self—becomes oddly objective; more than anything, it perceives. It exists more easily in the abstract sphere of thought and observations than in the world. . . . It seems that when I write (or, for that matter, think) in English, I am unable to use the word “I.” I do not go as far as the schizophrenic “she”—
but I am driven, as by a compulsion, to the double, the Siamese-twin “you.” (Hofman, 1989, p. 121)

This in-between place should not be viewed as the static synthesis of what immigrants brought along with them and what they found in the new country, but a constantly maintained sense of difference. As Chiellino states, “Difference is the source of creativity which is lost as soon as the boundary between the familiar and the foreign is blurred” (1995, p. 51).

**Textual Identities of the Third Kind**

We have seen that textuality itself can serve as a catalyst for expressing thoughts and experiences unique to the non-native speaker and to his or her place between native and non-native cultures. Writing can be a rich, painful, and exhilarating experience that can help define the relationship of non-native writers to their native speaking environment.

We now turn to the effect that written texts can have on the social and cultural identity of non-native readers. In the following, we consider in some detail the case of an immigrant adolescent to the United States.¹

Willis, a 16-year-old high school junior, emigrated from Hong Kong to California with his parents and his older sister before Hong Kong reverted to Mainland China. When asked about his immigration experience, Willis said that “his family’s identity” had fallen” after immigration because of their lack of fluency in English: “We don’t know how to talk.” However, coming to live in the United States provided more political security for his family and educational opportunities for himself, he said.

Willis’ schooling experiences were not without obstacles. Like many other immigrant students in the United States, he felt marginalized both academically and socially in school (Olsen, 1995). When he entered middle school, he was placed in a low-level class after being tested on English and Chinese. Although he did well on the Chinese part, his poor English assessment results led him into a very elementary class with other immigrant students, where, he said, he learned nothing at all for an entire year. After four years of ESL and bilingual programs, Willis transferred to the regular classes.

He mentioned that he once fought with the school counselor to get into the regular and honors classes; the counselor had originally placed him in some ESL sheltered classes for the convenience of scheduling. He said he was afraid that having too many sheltered classes on his transcript would affect future college admission. He was also taking a number of literature classes because, he said, he had been taunted by his peers for being an ESL student for too long and he had to catch up.

On several occasions, he expressed anger over how some students laughed at him and other Chinese immigrants for their heavy accents and lack of fluency in English and tried to imitate their speech disparagingly. He described the experience of one of his classmates:

Like Feng Jin, he is in 12th grade. He always speaks Chinese, and he speaks English with a heavy accent. He doesn’t read very well in English, but it’s not really that bad. But then, those people always laugh at him, and imitate his voice, and they imitate in a really disgusting way. He is actually very angry with them, but he always tries hard to keep it down. He has told me, “When it gets to a point I can’t stand it any more, I’m gonna knock them over real bad.”²

Willis added that it was because of this discrimination that Chinese did not mix well with their English-speaking U.S. peers. Although he had made great leaps in his studies, he did not participate much in the social life of the school. He was unable to make friends with students from other races in the classrooms or school clubs; he only made friends with other Asians. One of his favorite pastimes outside school was reading comic books, especially Japanese comics, which could take up most of his evenings at home and night trips on the city buses.

The Japanese comic books that Willis and some of his Chinese peers read were translated into Chinese and copyrighted in Hong Kong. The

¹ This forms part of an ongoing study on the cross-cultural literacy practices of immigrant adolescents in the United States. We wish to thank Willis for the insights we have gained from his testimony.

² The use of the term identity in the mouth of a recent adolescent immigrant might be surprising. Willis has obviously projected on that fashionable term the loss of pride, the disorientation, and the humiliations endured by new immigrants to a foreign country.

³ All quotations of Willis’ words are excerpts from recorded conversations and interviews conducted with Eva Lam originally in Cantonese. Italicized words are code-switches to English by Willis himself; CAPS indicate emphatic stress.
trading and circulation of comic books among these teenagers is a frequent practice, although the amount of personal possession of comics varies from person to person. Willis had one of the largest collections of comic books among his peers and was often sought for borrowing. In his judgement, both the ideas and artistic quality of the Japanese comics were superior to those in the United States and Hong Kong. He had started taking some Japanese language classes offered in his high school in anticipation of reading the comics in their original version.

An analysis of the translated Japanese comic books shows a cross-cultural mixture of signs and images. As a text that originates in Japanese society, the Japanese comics undoubtedly encode many of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and material conditions of Japanese life. These appear, for example, in the titles of people (part of Japanese honorifics), the terminology for different social institutions (such as schools and government offices), and the untranslated written artifacts in the stories (receipts and bulletins, for example). However, in their Chinese translation, these inscriptions of Japanese culture are shadowed by the Chinese cultural resonances signified in the Chinese linguistic code. Although much of the translation is in standard written Chinese, it is also interspersed with a considerable amount of Cantonese vernacular language because Hong Kong is the main market for such comics. Moreover, in many of these books, different types of Westernized or Americanized images appear in parts of the texts—in English words in the table of contents, in the sketches of the authors and characters (one picture shows the author with a cup of coffee and a donut in hand), and in the contents and settings of the stories (one story depicts a group of teenagers performing a Western drama in a European-style mansion in Japan). Hence, the Chinese version of Japanese comics, as a hybrid textual form, constitutes a transnational popular youth culture that is as intriguing and pleasurable in its multiple layers of meaning as Borges’ Chinese encyclopedia translated from the Spanish into French.

The distribution of different varieties of comics across national boundaries have, on the one hand, generated a high degree of cross-cultural exchange and fusion, and, on the other, facilitated a process of sociocultural critique through the comparison and contrast of different national varieties. Willis’ reading of Japanese comics and his critical comparison of comics across cultures (discussed later) were situated within the larger social practice of reading comics of both the United States and Hong Kong varieties among his peers on both sides of the Pacific.

On several occasions, during both casual conversations and more focused interviews, Willis contrasted the different varieties of comics on the professional attitude, creativity, artistry, and cultural character of the people who produced them. He mentioned how, compared to the artistic design of the Japanese comics, those in Hong Kong were lower in quality due to their pursuit of quick profits:

The difference between the comics of the Hong Kong people and the Japanese people is in the BACKGROUND. Those [artists] who are well-known in Japan are never so lazy [sloppy]. But those in Hong Kong, because they want to turn things out really fast, so they are more lazy.

As for the U.S. comics, Willis criticized them for their extreme self-glorification and lack of creativity:

I really don’t appreciate those, because . . . their heroes seem like they will never, never be defeated, even if they are beaten up like CRAZY . . . in several episodes, in the end they are bound to win again . . . Even if they have tragedy ending, they will still make themselves . . . very ARROGANT. Like “X-man,” “Swamps,” “Spiderman,” “Batman,” I can’t bear to read them . . . What the Americans come up with are only . . . if it is not about the hero saving the pretty girl, then it is about . . . victory and glory. And no matter what, they are fighting all over the place and beating up one another . . . And they make THEMSELVES, THEMSELVES . . . the heroes. For example, the United States has also produced a version of the “Streetfighter” [comic and video game, original version from Japan]. The main character in the “Streetfighter” isn’t Gaile—seems like it should be Waite, a Japanese fellow. They [Americans] make Gaile the main character, the strongest one in the whole story, and how he is hero, things like that.

By contrast, in talking about Japanese comics, Willis mentioned a list of distinguishing characteristics—creativity, variety, educational quality, poignancy—that he could identify with and quite strongly desired.

After reading them, you want to follow them . . . For example, like when I saw “Ding Dong” [Japanese comic book] . . . if I had this Ding Dong (chuckles), I could even control the world. What I’m saying is you fantasize together with the book . . . there are things you can think about. And sometimes there are books which contain some lessons in them, some educational stuff . . . Those books sometimes teach you perhaps not to be greedy, or, uh, uh, to be more kind to others, not to be arrogant, stuff like
that. Sometimes they would... like “Kam Tin Yat”... after reading it, you will feel that you can think more. Those books would sometimes talk about some FACTS. I mean, like those things you don’t usually learn at school, you can sometimes learn from reading those books... Those that fantasize oneself as the hero, although I haven’t really done so myself. But, but those can be, uh, pretty attractive too... And their stories are a lot more attractive. They have some that are really intriguing. And some are... as you read it, you feel a little sad, and things like that. How will you ever feel sad when you read “X-men?” One falls dead and another rushes up, one falls dead and another rushes up. That’s the difference.

A closer look at Willis’ discourse on comics shows us how each text positions Willis differently as a reader and offers him a different sociocultural identity. His use of personal pronouns is one way in which he indexes his relationship to American and Hong Kong cultures. The use of third-person collective pronominal forms—“they” and “those people” to designate the people in Hong Kong, “they” and “themselves” to designate the Americans—sets both up as distinct objects of criticism. The repeated and emphatic stress on the reflexive pronoun “themselves” serves to accentuate the self-centeredness and self-aggrandizement of the American psyche. While Willis is distancing himself from these two groups through third person pronouns, he identifies himself with other readers of Japanese comics through the use of second and first person pronouns. These pronouns express a distinct personal relationship to the Japanese experience as illustrated in the Japanese comics.

The different social realities depicted in these comics are revealed through Willis’ use of modality. The hype of American rhetoric resonates through his use in Cantonese of emphatic modifiers such as “very,” “usually,” “never,” and the superlatives “strongest” and “greatest.” Such modifiers give a factual and categorical quality to his statements. The automaticity, almost robot-like behavior of American characters is also emphasized through the repetition of words and phrases, such as “beaten up like crazy” and “one falls dead and another rushes up.” In contrast to these, Willis’ description of Japanese comics is much more nuanced. Here, modal auxiliaries and adverbs “could,” “would,”

4 The teenage male protagonist in one of Willis’ favorite Japanese comic series. Though branded as a poor student in school, Kam Tin Yat is able to demonstrate his intelligence and passion for justice in solving many puzzling criminal cases.

“sometimes,” “perhaps,” and the conditional “if” (“if I had this Ding Dong”), serve to create a relativized world of possibility and human contingency; the verb “want” (“you want to follow them”) expresses Willis’ desire to make this possibility a reality.

By projecting himself into the textual community of the Japanese comics, Willis, a non-native reader, has discovered a new self aligned with what he perceives as the Japanese “hero,” distanced from both the American and the Hong Kong “heroes.” Comparing the depictions of heroes in the different societies, Willis said:

The U.S. [hero] is the most... upright and courageous one. There are the good guys and the bad guys, and nothing else. The ones in Hong Kong, there is this group and that group, the good guys and bad guys, and some sort in-between... As for the Japanese characters, they won’t be drawn... all handsome and stuff. They have some who are ugly, silly, and tall, and short. The American ones are like... if you are not smart enough you are ruled out of the game, that’s what is in the story... The Japanese hero... like “Kam Tin Yat,” you can hardly call him a hero... He sometimes acts like an idiot and does some stupid things, like he would trip over while walking along the street (laughs)... I can’t imagine the U.S. will produce a character like that, almost impossible.

It is clear that Willis found the Japanese notion of hero in the texts he read more appealing than in either the United States or the Hong Kong counterparts. Indeed, Willis’ difficulty in equating the Japanese male protagonist with the U.S. English word hero harks back to the difficulties we had at the beginning of this chapter in fitting Borges’ taxonomy into our cognitive and linguistic categories; it echoes the qualms of non-native writers like Eva Hoffman trying to fit her non-native experiences into the language of English native speakers. Here, whereas the nature of the Hong Kong hero is nondescript (possibly reflecting the lack of clear status and autonomy of Hong Kong society), and the U.S. hero is the quintessential good guy with a standard form and character (suggesting perhaps the monolithic construction of a U.S. national culture that marginalizes what it views as “other”), Willis sees the Japanese hero as the common folk, the less than perfect people, who live through predicaments in life with thoughtfulness and a sense of humor. Willis’ place is indeed an in-between place. Between the impossibility of identifying with the native Hong Kong person he used to be, and his refusal to identify with the standardized U.S. person whose English he
now speaks, Willis finds his place, as a non-native, among the common folk hero in the textual world of Japanese comics.

The role of reading and writing in the social construction of self has been pointed out in a growing body of research on literacy practices in the native language (see, for example, Cherland, 1994; Mahiri & Sablo, 1997). These studies show how people represent themselves or develop certain kinds of ethnic or gendered identity through the practices of reading and writing in their first language within a given society. In Willis’ case, his identity was constructed intertextually, through the reading of popular cultural texts from Hong Kong, the United States, and Japanese societies of which he was variously a native and a non-native participant. As Fiske noted, the meanings of popular texts are created intertextually; they occur “at the moment of reading where the social relationships of the reader meet the discursive structure of the text” (Fiske, 1989, p. 122). Willis’ reading practice is situated in a larger transnational discourse of comics that allows for the juxtaposition of different world views and social practices. The global circulation of cultural forms has resulted in an interpenetration of the global and the local (Appadurai, 1996; Wilson & Dissanayake, 1996), where the self is now fashioned from the “flow of [global and local] signs and images which saturate the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society” (Featherstone, 1992, p. 168). And the imagination has become an important site where people find their mode of cultural belonging. As Grossberg said recently: “It is not where people belong that is important, but how people belong—the various ways people are attached and attach themselves affectively into the world” (1997). For Willis, this attachment occurred through what we could call the “textual home” of a global popular culture.

Willis’ participation in the popular discourse of comics was both a private enjoyment and a claim for a public persona. As a non-native reader, he appropriated a textual identity from the Japanese comics, and used it as a third place from which to reflect in an official interview with the researcher on the cultural practices of both the United States and Hong Kong societies. By creating this position for himself, Willis was able to verbalize the arbitrary nature of the linguistic and cultural norms of the two societies.

Conclusion

In this chapter we explored the potential of written texts to help non-native speakers define their relation toward the native speakers whose language they are using and to offer them what we called “textual identities of the third kind.”

The frustrations and humiliations experienced by immigrants like Martina and Willis and the eventual sense of pride they gained by writing and reading texts in the foreign language were echoed and confirmed in the autobiographies of professional non-native writers like Eva Hoffman, Leila Sebar, and others. What all these experiences had in common was first, the sense of security that the written medium provides non-native speakers. Unlike the evanescent spoken word with its social pressure to conform and its highly conventionalized rituals of everyday life that might make non-native speakers the targets of scorn and ridicule, the written word offers them the possibility of expressing and reflecting upon their unique experience as immigrants or foreigners. In addition, texts have the power to give them a public voice that may be distinct from both their native, private voice, and the dominant discourse of the native-speaking majority. Finally, written texts offer non-native speakers opportunities for finding textual homes outside the boundaries of local or national communities. The uses of literacy in today’s global, multicultural economy are likely to alter our notions of who is native and who is non-native. Indeed they make non-nativeness in the sense of “outsideness” one of the most important criteria of creativity and innovation.

If reading and writing are meant primarily to help learners develop a secure, public persona and to give them access to a larger community of text producers and consumers through the medium of English as an International Language, it is important that language teachers themselves cultivate both an insider’s and an outsider’s attitude toward English, whether they be native or non-native speakers of the language. Such a position of defamiliarization in Foucault’s sense, of “exile” in Sebar’s words, implies a tension between the standardized, native norms of the English language and the ability of the non-native writer/reader to see through these norms and to test their limits. Rather than being used primarily for socializing the non-natives into the ways of the standardized natives, the written language can offer the opportunity to express human thoughts and feelings that non-native speakers have experienced particularly acutely. It is in such textual spaces that native and non-native users of English may encounter one another and discover that they are all, in fact, “foreigners to themselves” (Kristeva, 1988/1991).
PART TWO

Sociopolitical Concerns

It was stated in the Introduction that no issue is more troubling to NNSs teaching in ESL contexts than that of discrimination in employment. Originating with the Makarere Conference tenet that the ideal English teacher is a native speaker (the “native speaker fallacy”) and continued by the Chomskyan notion of the native speaker as an ideal informant on a language, the discrimination faced by NNSs in employment is also being justified under the pretext that ESL students prefer to be taught by NSs. Despite the ineffectiveness of so-called Native English Speaker or Expatriate Teacher programs, the preference for NS teachers is evident in EFL contexts, too (see Boyle, 1997, for a critique of the Expatriate English Teachers Scheme in Hong Kong).

In addition to discrimination in employment, NNSs also face numerous other challenges. Their credentials from the Periphery are questioned, their accents are derided, and they are often marginalized in the profession.

In Chapter 6, Suresh Canagarajah unravels the causes and consequences of the native speaker fallacy in order to understand it from a larger social perspective. Tracing the marginalization of speakers of other Englishes in the TESOL profession to the fallacy, Canagarajah first examines the linguistic basis of the fallacy by critiquing its Chomskyan origins and arguing for new terminology to reflect the linguistic competence of postcolonial English speakers. He also questions the application of the fallacy to ESL pedagogy, pointing out that a knowledge of other languages (by NNS teachers) can foster more effective language teaching. Canagarajah then explores the political implications of the fallacy in the context of “English only” ideologies.

References


1 However, if the preference of students is the criterion for employing ESL teachers in the United States, then southern and midwestern males should probably be the preferred types. In a study of learner attitudes toward regional accents, males with southern or midwestern accents scored higher than northern males and females from the north, the south, and midwest on a variety of characteristics ranging from “very intelligent” to “professional” and “extrovert” (Alford & Strother, 1990).