

## THE NON-NATIVE TEACHER: INTERVIEW WITH PROF. PÉTER MEDGYES

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Péter Medgyes, CBE, is Professor Emeritus of Applied Linguistics and Language Pedagogy. During his career he was a schoolteacher, teacher trainer, vice rector, vice president of IATEFL, deputy state secretary and ambassador of Hungary. He was a plenary speaker in over fifty countries and author of numerous books and papers published both in his home country and abroad. His most recent book is the third edition of *The Non-native Teacher* (Swan Communication, 2017). His main professional interests lie in teacher education, language policy and humour research.

**FD** : Professor Medgyes, first of all I would like to thank you for this interview. I am so happy and proud to have this opportunity especially because I have admired your work since I was in my MA years.

**PM** : Thank you so much for your kind words. But please call me Péter.

**FD** : OK. Péter, you've been very much involved in the topic of native and non-native teachers. How did it all begin?

**PM** : As a young nonnative teacher working in a secondary school I developed an inferiority complex due to my less than native English-language competence. On the other hand, I realised that I had certain attributes that native teachers lacked. Then in the late 1980s I was lucky enough to spend

a year in the U. S. as a Fulbright Fellow. I spent most of my time in the well-stocked library of the University of Southern California, eagerly looking for relevant articles and books on the subject of how native and nonnative teachers of English differ from each other. To my surprise, there were none. ‘Wow, does this mean that I’ve broken new ground?’ I asked myself. I set about sending out questionnaires through various channels to colleagues near and far. It wasn’t an easy job when only snail mail was available.

**FD** : Of course. Email was still a thing of the future.

**PM** : The assumptions I put forward in my book were based on the collected data combined with my own experience. Not long after I returned home I finished the manuscript of *The Non-native Teacher* and sent it off to a major British publisher. And they rejected it out of hand.

**FD** : But why?

**PM** : There was no explanation. Perhaps because it was poor quality (*laughing*) or because a nonnative author was regarded as an outsider. At that time, research was a privilege of natives, you know. I was disappointed but didn’t give up. I forwarded the manuscript to Susan Holden at Macmillan, and she liked the book so much that she published it in less than a year. That was in 1994 and a year later it won the *Duke of Edinburgh English Language Book Competition* in the Teachers’ Books category.

**FD** : The first edition of your book *The Non-native Teacher* was phenomenal and had a major influence on research in applied linguistics. The third edition was published in 2017 (18 years after the second edition in 1999). What prompted you to write this new edition?

**PM** : Unfortunately, both the first and the second editions went out of print pretty fast. This was due to big changes in the European publishing industry around that time. Nevertheless, interest in the native/nonnative conundrum had been aroused so much that, according to Kamhi-Stein’s (2016) calculations, 356 relevant pieces were published in the preceding past quarter century, in addition to about a dozen full-length books. Meanwhile, there were repeated requests from colleagues from around the world if they could borrow a copy of my book. Postage costs were

exorbitantly high... However, I'd never have thought seriously about a third edition if it hadn't been for Susan Holden.

**FD** : What do you mean?

**PM** : Well, she asked if I'd be prepared to do it. She said she'd publish it through her own small publishing house, Swan Communication. And she did.

**FD** : How is this new edition different from the first two?

**PM** : I left the original text essentially unaltered, but added more than a hundred tasks, activities and ideas, all featuring in the margin. The text is printed in black whereas the margin notes are in blue. This way it is not only an awareness-raising book, but one which can be effectively used in pre- and in-service training as well.

**FD** : What was the hardest part of writing this current edition?

**PM** : Perhaps I shouldn't admit it, but I found it very tiring to bring myself up-to-date with all the books and articles written on the subject.

**FD** : And what did you enjoy most?

**PM** : Same thing. Reading the literature was most stimulating. And I was impressed that the majority of authors were nonnative teachers like myself.

**FD** : Some scholars have criticized the NS/NNS dichotomy and suggested alternative terms such as 'bilingual or multilingual speakers of English' instead of NNESTs. How do you view these criticisms?

**PM** : There are quite a few different labels, but the NEST/non-NEST terms can't be 'magicked away', to quote Pacek (2005). Paradoxically, even those who vociferously oppose the idea of dividing teachers into two groups abide by the NEST/non-NEST distinction, as a rule. So do I.

**FD** : That's exactly the point. Is this distinction still necessary today?

**PM** : It's a moot point. I realise that it doesn't stand up to linguistic scrutiny. Apart from definitional problems, there are in-between cases aplenty. Separation is obviously fueled by ideological and professional considerations, too. Native speaker fallacy, native speakerism, othering teachers from their peers and the rest – all in inverted commas. Nevertheless, who

would argue that I'm a nonnative speaker of English whereas my colleague Christopher, with whom I share an office is a native speaker of English? We're different, but equally good teachers (or bad ones). However, there are lots of other attributes that must be taken into consideration when we judge teacher quality: length of experience, teaching qualifications, personal traits, motivation, love of children, and so on.

**FD** : In some countries (mostly in European countries), it's illegal to discriminate against employing people on the basis of nationality. In many countries in Asia, however, many people still believe that native speakers are better role models for English language learners (see 'Asian Students Still Idolize Western Professors', for example).

**PM** : You shouldn't think that in Europe discrimination is a thing of the past. In large European cities too I've seen lots of ads insisting on employing NESTs only. Their excuse is that that's what parents and learners demand. But has anyone examined whether this assumption is legitimate? I don't think so.

**FD** : Still, what can each of the stakeholders (NNESTs, NESTs, policy makers, school leaders, parents, and learners) do to change this perception?

**PM** : I wish I had the philosophers' stone! All I know is that it takes forever to change people's mindsets and attitudes. But we mustn't stop fighting.

**FD** : In your book *The Non-native Teacher*, you argue against proficiency in language as a superior model of teaching. But in ELT, isn't high proficiency of English a must? What is considered "enough English proficiency"? Is it C2 level? In Malaysia, for example, the government requires English language teachers to achieve the C2 level.

**PM** : C1 and C2 are just labels. Every non-NEST should be aware that a high level of language proficiency is a make-or-break requirement in the profession. Therefore, we should go out of our way to improve our language competence.

**FD** : What is your advice to beginning scholars or researchers that are interested to know more about the NEST/NNEST controversy?

- PM** : Learning about research is important, but what is far more important is to gain hands-on experience in the classroom. Honestly, I don't give a damn about ivory-tower researchers.
- FD** : Péter, we also would like to thank you for contributing a story to our upcoming book 'Inspirational Stories from English Language Classrooms' (edited by Flora D. Floris and Willy A. Renandya, published by TEFLIN). Thank you for supporting us. May we know what sparked your interest to respond to our call for stories?
- PM** : I thought it was a great idea. What can be more inspiring and fun, yes, fun, than sharing great stories? Humans are story-telling animals. I'm sorry about this mixed metaphor...
- FD** : The story you submitted to our book is very beautiful; and personally I think it's one of the best and heart-touching stories I have ever read. Perhaps you've published stories or written any stories that are not published?
- PM** : I'm not a man of great imagination. I can only write about things that happened to me or to those around me. Incidentally, my latest book came out a few weeks ago under the title *I've run away from home*. It's about my travels to nearby and distant lands. Believe it or not, I've been to 100 countries!
- FD** : Wow! Have you been to Indonesia too?
- PM** : Yes, but not to Jakarta or Bali where most tourists go. I paid a very brief visit to Pontianak in Borneo.
- FD** : Pontianak of all places? How come?
- PM** : I was a keynote speaker at an English teachers' conference in Kuching Malaysia and Pontianak was a stone's throw from there. I went to see the Equator Museum and I got my Certificate of Equator Crossing.
- FD** : Incredible!... Where can I buy your book "I've run away from home"?
- PM** : (*Laughing*) Can you read in Hungarian? Because it's a book I wrote in my mother tongue.

**FD** : What's coming up next for you? Are you now working on another book or another research project?

**PM** : In collaboration with a fellow Hungarian, Tamás Kiss, I'm in the middle of writing a paper about the specific challenges and difficulties expatriate NESTs working in foreign countries are faced with. Not much has been written on this subject, so I'd like to find out more about it.

**FD** : Thank you, Péter for this wonderful interview. I hope that you can join our annual TEFLIN International Conference in the near future.

**PM** : You're welcome. I am looking forward to sharing my ideas with colleagues in Indonesia.

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