

“I’m the teacher!”

“But I’m the native speaker!”

## Exploring the challenges that English native speakers bring to the EFL classroom

Sylvia Nadig

### Abstract

This article will focus on the various issues involved for primary teachers, English-speaking children and their parents, and will offer ideas on how to better cater for this particular group of children. It will take into account only those children who have at least one English-speaking parent.



### Biography

Sylvia Nadig has been the Head of the Foreign Language Department and Lecturer of English methodology at the Pädagogische Hochschule Zug since 2004.

The brief conversation in the title sums up the tension that might arise in English lessons in a state school of a non-English speaking country, for example in Switzerland, when a teacher is confronted by an English-speaking child who corrects their English.

The topic of native speakers in the foreign language classroom has been highly neglected in methodology in Switzerland and abroad. Mirjam Egli Cuenat and her colleagues from the Pädagogische Hochschule FHNW have done substantial work on children with French as their mother tongue. As for English, one of the only documents that exists so far is the “Tipps für den Unterricht mit Native Speakers” from the Fachgruppe Fremdsprachen des Kantons Zug. In recent years, the English department and students of the Pädagogische Hochschule Zug have been focusing on this topic with regard to primary schools. In Canton Zug, this challenge is particularly prominent as it has the highest percentage of English speakers among their population in Switzerland (11%) and an increasing number of English-speaking parents prefer to send their children to local schools. They partly would like their children to fully integrate and learn the local language or they might prefer the state schools because many companies no longer pay for tuition for private schools when an international contract is changed into a local hire contract.

### The English teachers

In Swiss primary state schools, English is taught by the regular primary teachers who also teach the other subjects. They study English methodology as part of their teacher training at a Pädagogische Hochschule (PH) and have to reach a certain language level (in most PHs an international C1 certificate). When English was introduced into Swiss primary schools, based on the Sprachenstrategie of 2004 which

was formulated by the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Directors of Education (EDK), the option of hiring external subject teachers with English as their mother tongue in the schools to teach English was considered, but soon dismissed, partly because the teachers' union did not want the state school teachers to lose those hours. The legacy from this decision is a potentially “inverted hierarchy” where English-speaking children have a higher level of English than their teacher; at least regarding oral skills.

### A possible threat to the teacher

Having one or even several English native speakers in their classroom can be quite intimidating for a teacher. Especially in their early career years, some teachers might find these children a threat because they fear that their own authority is being undermined, especially if they are being challenged in front of the whole class. An English-speaking child might detect within the first few English sentences which the teacher pronounces that their own oral skills are above that of their teacher. Differences due to variations of English can also play a role, for example when an American child disagrees with the teacher who uses the word “waste paper basket” rather than “trash”.

Instead of feeling challenged by English-speaking students, the teacher could embrace this situation and say: “Wonderful, we have an English expert in our class! Can we ask you for your expertise when we need it?” Native speakers can represent a wonderful additional source of authentic language input as well as cultural background knowledge for their classmates. It is important that the teacher acknowledges the high competence of the native speakers from the start and sees them as a resource rather than a threat. If the teacher does not like being corrected in front of the whole class, they can make an agreement with the native speakers to come by after class. Instead of an antagonism, the teacher should be able to say, without any negative feelings: “Yes, I am the teacher, and you are the native speaker! You’re an expert in English, and I’m an expert in how to teach English, including how to cater for your needs, too.”

### The English-speaking students

Bored, underchallenged, frustrated, overlooked – this is how many English-speaking children feel in their English lessons, especially in the lower primary grades when their peers are learning chunks like “What’s your name?” Very often, native speakers have to do exactly the same thing as the rest of the class, and many of them get so frustrated that they become disruptive and even start to hate English! But according to most cantonal regulations, they cannot be exempt

from English lessons, have to take the same tests as the rest of the class, and be evaluated exactly the same way. As the English-speaking children are often not much stronger in reading and writing than the rest of the class, they should follow at least part of the regular English lessons and they, too, have to study for a test. Being a native speaker does not automatically mean that they get a 6 in English!

The role of English-speaking pupils in their English lessons is often reduced to that of “helpers” who have to support weaker learners. However, not all children like doing this or are satisfied with only supporting the others. This is very well expressed in the title of an article called “I felt like I was forced to be the teacher sometimes.” – Muttersprachler\*innen im Fremdsprachenunterricht. It is vital that in the first few lessons, the teacher asks every native speaker what they wish to do during English classes (see below).

## The parents

The parents’ views and plans for the family also have to be taken into account. If they plan to move to an English-speaking country in the near future, or if their child would like to study at an English-speaking university later on, they will be very concerned about the level of English, and keen on the teacher giving their child extra language work to complete.

A lot of tension can arise from the difficulty that international parents have in understanding the Swiss school system, in which only a relatively small percentage of children are admitted to high school (“Gymnasium”). The average number of young people obtaining the “gymnasiale Maturität” is only 22% according to the most recent Swiss government study (Bundesamt für Statistik 2021). Therefore, the vast majority of teenagers go to Sekundarschule and then start an apprenticeship around the age of 15 or 16, with the possibility of obtaining later on a “Berufsmaturität” (15.9%). For international parents, who mostly come from countries in which practically everyone goes to high school up to the age of 18 and decides only then in which direction to go, the Swiss system is very difficult to understand. This can lead to distrust and disagreements over the schooling of a child.

Parents can refer to books like that of Margaret Oertig (2012). *Going Local: Your Guide to Swiss Schooling* or Robin Hull (2020) *A Guide to the Swiss Educational System*. For Parents with a UK or International Background, but also to websites such as Swiss Education Consulting (<https://swisseducationconsulting.ch>).

## Possible solutions for catering for English-speaking students

The way English is taught in primary schools in Switzerland already provides a lot of possibilities to accommodate the additional needs of native speakers within the class: both the content and language integrated learning approach (CLIL) as well as task-based learning (TBL) do not focus on the language, but on the content, which, hopefully, is also interesting for the native speakers in a class. English-speaking learners can conduct additional research on any topic and write about it, and open tasks allow each learner to work at their level.

The PH Zug already offers some useful material for primary teachers which they can use to cater for their English-speakers. This website, ([www.fremdsprachen.phzg.ch](http://www.fremdsprachen.phzg.ch)), gives lists with book recommendations given by the International School of Zug and Luzern librarian, as well as booklets which PH Zug students have developed for every unit of the most widely used coursebook in Switzerland called *Young World* by Klett. These booklets give English native speakers the opportunity to work at their own language level, focusing particularly on written skills, but always in connection with the coursebook unit.

However, more needs to be done than just giving native speakers the possibility of working at their own level; they should, in addition, receive some training which helps them to specifically improve certain language areas. Who knows how to teach English as a mother tongue better than those who have received the training and

experience to do so, i.e. teachers from English-speaking countries? Precisely such a group of experienced teachers from various anglophone countries who have moved to Switzerland, in particular to Zug and Zurich, with their children in local schools, are collaborating under the name of “The English Extension Organization” (TEEO) ([www.theenglishextension.org](http://www.theenglishextension.org)). They are producing support material for teachers, parents, and students at primary and secondary level so as to better meet the needs of English-speaking children. Theresa Jäger, one of the members who taught primary in New Zealand, England, and international schools in Switzerland, is currently creating a different type of booklet for the *Young World* units, with a strong focus on spelling, grammar, word formation, reading, and writing. Children might need some guidance, though, either by a parent or a specialized teacher, as the regular English teacher is usually too busy with the rest of the class. These booklets will be available on the TEEO website.

Obviously, there is a wide variety of language competence among English-speaking children, which largely depends on whether their main caregiver is of English mother tongue or not. In addition, their attitude to learning, motivation to improve their own English competence, and their ability to work by themselves varies.

A native English speaker who has been teaching English as a subject teacher since 2010 in a state primary school in canton Zurich, having obtained the EDK accreditation, has a lot of experience catering for native speakers within her lessons. In discussions about what direction the English native speakers would like to take their learning, she talks about their mother tongue as a “super power” which makes this subject very easy for them, but she stresses that it is up to them if and how they want to exploit that power. It is important that the teacher first assesses their language level and then talks to each of them, finding out whether during the English lessons, they would like to

- just take it easy and “shine”
- improve their own language level, and if so, in which areas (e.g. spelling, which is particularly hard in English, vocabulary, grammar, creative writing etc.)
- read books
- write a lot
- partly work on their German
- do research on a topic connected to the course book unit, write a text about it or create a poster to give a presentation in front of the whole class
- create material for the class, e.g. a word search or a crossword for the vocabulary of the unit, a Kahoot on a reading text
- read out the texts in the coursebook to the class
- write questions or true and false statements for the listening and reading passages in the coursebook intended for their classmates or for the other native speakers
- function as helpers for weaker learners
- be a class assistant who takes over a group of learners for an activity, a game etc.
- come up with their own ideas on what they could do during their English lessons

If a school has a considerable number of English native speakers, it could

- schedule all the English lessons of one grade at the same time and put all the English speakers into the strongest group;
- hire an external teacher whose mother tongue is English to regularly teach the native speakers. They could be paid for example like a “Schulassistentz”;
- organize a pull-out programme (meaning taking certain students out of the classroom) as part of their gifted learner programme, like the “Englisch Mentorat” of the Stadtschulen Zug (<https://www.stadtschulenzug.ch/news/93391>). Stormy Berney, an American teacher and member of TEEO, currently teaches the primary students in the Stadtschulen Zug. In the abovementioned website, the article *Ein Extra für Zuger*

Expat Kinder describes how she teaches six double lessons to the native speakers of one school over six weeks, before moving on to the next school. For the secondary students, she is currently developing a curriculum to offer career search workshops for those who wish to approach international companies for internships in English.

## Joining forces

A lot still needs to be done for native speakers in the English primary – and also secondary - classroom. A very promising path to follow is the public schools opening themselves up to the expertise of teachers who have taught English in English-speaking countries. The research and development project which Nadig & Stanic of the Pädagogische Hochschule Zug launched on “English-speaking children in local primary schools of canton Zug” (2021 – 2023) will explore the issue from all the different perspectives and produce a wide range of support, with the intention of making a substantial contribution to improving the situation for all the players involved: the English-speaking children, their parents, and their teachers.

## Call for participation

Any reactions or experiences related to the topic of English native speakers in local primary (or secondary) schools are most welcome, in particular if you have had the opportunity to teach native speakers within the state system. Please contact [sylvia.nadig@phzg.ch](mailto:sylvia.nadig@phzg.ch).

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