



Haunting Native Speakerism? Students' Perceptions toward Native Speaking English Teachers in Taiwan

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Abstract

This paper intends to explore how Taiwanese university students perceive their native-speaking English teachers (NESTs). Mutual expectations between the NESTs and students are also investigated. Collected data include questionnaires from 107 students and interviews with three NESTs and 19 students who have filled out the questionnaire. The result shows that students expect more encouragement and interaction with the NESTs, and more relaxed activities with fewer assignments and tests. A third of the students expect NEST with a standard accent, while a quarter do not care about accent at all. The NESTs reveal their dissatisfaction toward the students' passiveness and lack of responsiveness. While students expect their NESTs to be interactive, they themselves seem to give the NESTs an impression of unwillingness to participate. The discussion centers on this dilemma and offers some suggestions for English teachers.

Keywords: Students' expectation, NEST, NNEST, Native speakerism

1. Introduction

People are becoming more interconnected in the wake of the fast-growing trend of globalization through cultural and technological exchange. English has become the primary medium of international communication (Crystal, 2003). With the overwhelming influence of English, it is apparent that the number of English learners will only soar. The discussion of teaching English is becoming quite heated as a consequence.

Traditionally, learning and teaching a foreign language has been predicated on the distinction between native and non-native speakers (Davis, 1991). Native speakers have tended to be regarded as the model. Native English speakers have the advantage over non-native speakers and are often viewed around the world as the embodiment of the English standard. Native speakers are endowed by non-native speakers with high level of credibility. In turn, non-native speakers are expected to mimic the native speaker's vocabulary, grammar, idioms and culture (See Holliday, 2005, on native speakerism).

Taiwan has been ranked in the expanding circle of concentric circle model, where English is used primarily as a foreign language (Crystal, 1997). Under the impact of English as a global language, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Taiwan made a dramatic reform in education policy. English was introduced in the curriculum at elementary schools in 2001. Since then, students at every level are required to learn English. There will be, for sure, a larger number of English teachers needed than before. In Taiwan's ESL/EFL context, non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) still predominate over native English speaking teachers (NESTs). Although there is higher number of NNESTs, NESTs seem to be favored more in the field of English teaching. However, the language one uses is extremely different from the language one teaches. English proficiency should be dependent on "what you know" rather than "who you are" (Rampton, 1990). Thus, from the early 1980s, the question of "who is a qualified English teacher?" seemed to attract more and more attention. Native speakers were accorded a prestige they did not necessarily have in the 1950s and 1960s when the grammar-translation method of language teaching prevailed. As language learners pay more attention to their spoken ability than before, native speakers became the popular choice in Taiwan. Aster (2000) notes that pedagogy, psychological preparation, and knowledge in applied linguistics are vital to the performance of any teacher. This study attempts to explore factors that affect the teaching and learning efficiency of teachers and students, using questionnaires and interviews.

2. Related Study

Although there are more and more voices for more equality between native and non-native teachers, the actual situation is quite another story. Todd & Pojanapunya (2009) focus on the conflict between the educational principle of equality between NESTs and NNESTs and the commercial realities of Thailand. It is worthwhile to note that a similar situation exists in the commercial advertising for ESL in both Thailand and Taiwan. Cram schools and institutions offering English language programs often promote themselves as employing NESTs and advertisements for teaching positions often require that applicants are native speakers. A plethora of studies deal with the case, for and against, NS teachers vis-a-vis their performance, attitude, and approach. Jin (2005) notes that Chinese students aspired to the British and American English standard due to a lack of opportunity and access to updated information on “World English”, which has in turn led to a blind adoration of native-speaker as the norm. Although more and more students accept the concept of “World English”, it is not easy for many to alter their conscious preference for native speakers. Ryan (1998) points out that teachers’ attitudes and belief strongly affect students’ behavior. Native teachers show more self-esteem than non-native teachers (Mahboob, 2004). Bulter (2007) examines the influence between native and non-native teachers’ accents on students’ performance; the result indicates that native teachers tend to have more confidence in their use of English.

Medgyes (1994) notes that an ideal native-speaking English teacher should possess a high degree of proficiency in the learner’ mother language. It could be easier for NESTs in the EFL setting, but compared to that in the EFL setting, NESTs would have difficulties in the ESL setting. In Medgyes’ book, he discusses the differences between native and non-native English speakers’ use of English, general attitude, attitude to teaching language, and attitude to teaching culture. In terms of their use of English, he notes that NESTs use real English and use it more confidently compared to NNESTs. This argument has been questioned by Rampton (1990) who stresses that a native speaker does not mean he inherently speaks his first language well. Ownership of language is not necessarily equal to language competence. Barratt and Contra’s (2000) accuses NESTs of discouraging learners since they have no capacity or willingness to make comparisons and contrasts to the students’ native language. Despite such disadvantages native speakers are still more popular and preferable in the English language teaching profession (Clark & Paran, 2007).

What difference does being native speaker of English make in the ESL/EFL classroom? Cook (1999) argues that language teaching would benefit by paying more attention to the L2 user rather than concentrating on the native speaker. One group of teachers should not necessarily be superior to another (Braine, 2005). What teachers should care about is how to improve their teaching through more professional training in linguistics and sociolinguistics. Most of all, they need to understand better the needs of students. Nunan (2003) asserts:

If English is a necessity, steps should be taken to ensure that teachers are adequately trained in language teaching methodology appropriate to a range of learner ages and stages, that teachers’ own language skills are significantly enhanced, that classroom realities meet curricular rhetoric, and that students have sufficient exposure to English in instructional context (p.610).

In Taiwan, English has become a necessity. Steps have also been taken to increase English proficiency in general. However, the outcome is far from being realized. Students’ communicative competence has long been neglected and hindered due to teacher-related, student-related, and educational system constraints. Teacher-related problems derive largely from NNEST’s deficiency in spoken English and lack of socio-linguistic and cultural sophistication (Li, 1998; Nunan, 2003). Students’ low proficiency in English and passive learning style do not help matters. Student reticence and passivity has an Asian cultural interpretation (Liu & Littlewood, 1997). Although different perspectives exist (Cheng, 2000), many foreign teachers express a good deal of frustration in the face of student reticence and passivity (Song, 1995; Jin & Cortazzi, 1993).

According to Yang (1978) and Wang (1994), traditional EFL instruction in Taiwan focuses on teacher-centered, grammar-translation, and exam-oriented approaches. These approaches fail to meet the student need to express or comprehend messages in English when they study abroad. Ko (1985) attributes students’ low proficiency in English to inappropriate teaching methods. Scovel (1983) notes grammar-translation and exam-oriented assessment make it harder for ESL/EFL students to use English as a communicative medium.

3. Research Questions

Assuming that Taiwan’s official national language, Mandarin, is best taught and learned from a native Chinese speaker, then it certainly would follow that English ought to be accorded the same pedagogical consideration. From a linguistic point of view, it is easy to observe the difference between NESTs and NNESTs in terms of language competence. Phillipson (1992) uses the term “the native speaker fallacy” to refer to unequal treatment of non-native English speakers. In Taiwanese private language institutions, native English speakers are paid higher wages and receive more respect from students and parents alike. The surprising thing is that Taiwanese ESL/EFL professionalism does not count for more vis-a-vis the native English speakers’ language ability. Even more surprisingly, the native English speakers’

appearance is one of the vital factors in their employability in Taiwan's private language schools. A mere manipulator of the language, however, does not guarantee a good English teacher in the classroom. Ebele (1999) notes that:

English speakers benefit from the usual exotic allure of any foreign language, and they benefit from the commonly accepted idea that their native language is a practical skill useful in the workplace. In many cases, they were hired for teaching jobs solely on the basis of being a native speaker (p.339).

At tertiary education; however, the recruitment criteria are multi-dimensions. Clark E. & Paran (2007) note that the most important criteria for the employment of teachers are 'teaching qualifications', 'performance in interview', 'teaching experience', 'education background', 'recommendation', 'visa status', and 'native English speakers'. Although recruiters take into account each criterion, the result shows that 72.3% of the 90 respondents-- 50 private language schools, 27 universities and 13 further education colleges-- judged the 'native English speaker criterion' to be either moderately or very important. Their study indicates that the native speaker still has a privileged position in English language teaching, native speakers represent both the model speaker and the ideal teacher.

Based on the aforementioned arguments towards native teachers, we intend to elaborate the following questions:

(1) What are the university students' expectation and perception toward native teachers in general?

(2) What do the teachers and students expect of each other in their classroom interaction?

4. Methodology

A survey intended to measure students' expectation on the teaching of native-speaking teachers was conducted in June 2008 in the English department at a private university located in southern part of Taiwan. This department was established in the year of 2003. There were 163 students-- 47 freshmen, 33 sophomores, 43 juniors, and 40 seniors. In addition to students, there were eight teachers, including five local teachers and three foreign teachers in this department as the survey was conducted. The questions in the survey investigate student expectations from fourteen dimensions identified in Wu (2008). Questions of related dimensions are presented in a dispersed manner instead of clustered to prevent the lingering or associative effect. For example, questions about encouragement, class atmosphere, and teacher's attitude are the second, sixth, and twelfth item in the survey. A pilot version was given to ten seniors, and modifications based on problems and feedbacks were made before the questionnaire was formally administered to the 112 students. 107 valid questionnaires were filled out by 35 freshmen, 29 sophomores, 42 juniors, and one senior. This questionnaire was conducted in June, most of the seniors had left university after commencement, so only one of the seniors filled out this questionnaire (See Table 1).

Insert Table 1 here

Three NS teachers (See Table 2) were interviewed by both authors for approximately one hour before the questionnaire was administered to the students. The interview questions are similar to those in the questionnaire; only the focus was to understand the teachers' self-evaluation and expectation. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Insert Table 2 here

In the following month, after the survey was conducted, we randomly interviewed nineteen students who participated in the survey, six freshmen, six sophomore, six juniors, and one senior. The student interviews lasted ten minutes, focusing on students' ideas about their expectations vis-à-vis accent, teaching method, grammar, and essentially dimensions that showed great variance in the questionnaire. These interviews were recorded in field notes so that the students would not be afraid to share their true ideas in the presence of a recorder. Questionnaire data was analyzed using SPSS to examine correlations among the dimensions and different student groups. Interview data was compared with the survey result to investigate and explain the result, as well as provide other insights into the phenomenon in question.

4.1 Questionnaire results

1) General description: what do the students expect of native speaking teachers?

1a) Expectation

Of the 107 students, 106 regard it necessary to have native-speaking teachers in the department, but only 63 think their nationality is important. One strong expectation from the students concerns the NS teachers' teaching attitude. They anticipate that NS teachers will encourage them a lot in a very relaxed classroom atmosphere, and behave like friends with them (See Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 here

The majority of the students expect the NS teachers to be flexible, use more activities than lectures, correct their pronunciation, assign little or no homework, and rarely test them. There seems to be a set of related expectations from the students on NS teachers. Expecting a relaxed class, the students hope that NS teachers will employ more activities and bring up various topics as the circumstance allows without sticking to a certain teaching plan or covering all the

necessary content. The role of NS teachers, in the students' eyes, is mainly to be a model and correct their pronunciation, instead of being a traditional teacher who demands formal assessment like assignments and tests. In other words, the students wish to have fun in the class while improving their listening and speaking at the same time (See Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 here

The figures in these dimensions show stronger expectations and relatively low variations in these dimensions. For the other dimensions on teaching materials, speaking speed, grading criteria, and attention to grammar, the students made no strong preferences. (For a detailed description of the questionnaire result, see Appendix I).

1b) the dissonance between expectation and reality

The students complained that the NS teachers were not flexible enough in class (a difference of 1.76 in score), using too much of a lecturing style and too few activities (1.42). They also expect more encouragement (1.39) and attention to pronunciation (1.43) from the NS teachers, who they regard not friendly enough (1.99). Judging from the students' expectation of class atmosphere and teachers' encouragement, the main reason behind the dissonance between expectation and reality could be their unreasonable anticipation in these dimensions. The issue of pronunciation is tied to the assumptions concerning accent. The result also reveals that the NS teacher give fewer tests and assignments in the conversation class.

1c) compare the above differences to teachers' interviews

The NS teachers are not satisfied that the students are "very passive, lack of opinions and feedback" (Tom), "dependent and serious" (Gary), "immature and disrespectful" (Andy).

Tom: When I ask their opinions and comments in the class, only few of them responded. I wonder if they didn't understand what I said or they didn't prepare the assigned homework.

Gary: The students need to be more independent. They lack of critical thinking. When I ask them to express their point-of-views, they keep quiet all the time and wait for my answer.

Andy: The students come to class late, and have their food or snack in the class. I ask them to discuss in pairs or groups, some of them just chat in their native language and some just sit there.

It is likely that a gap exists in the interactions between the NS teacher and the students. The students hope for an extremely relaxed environment while they remain passive, dependent, and thus appear serious. However, NS teachers are just like other teachers, who offer adequate, not excessive encouragement, and maintain a proper distance with the students.

2) A bi-polar view on the issue of accent

The expectation on the NS teachers' accent varies greatly among the students. 23 students think it does not matter as long as it is understandable (a score of 1), and 30 students expect standard English from the NS teachers (a score of 10). The majority of the rest fall between 5 and 8 (See Figure 3).

Insert Figure 3 here

At the first impression the result seems to indicate the confusion on the norm of accent among the students. There are three kinds of perceptions on accent: not important, very important, and somewhat important. Each perception appeals to relatively similar proportions of the students. With the increasing number of foreign citizens in Taiwan, most Taiwanese began to be more flexible in their requirements of the accent of NS teachers. As the contacts broaden, people gradually find that almost all NS speakers have accents; Americans from the South speak very differently from the Americans from the New England. As a result, students' expectations change with the environment. This shows that students' expectations are fluid, and we can help students overcome the stereotypical bias they have regarding NS teachers.

But student interviews point out a problem in the design of the questionnaire. For some of them, standard English is also the best understandable English. The definition of being understood perhaps should not be on the other side of standard accent.

A senior: The accents in real world are of all kinds, so accent is not important. We should get used to different accents. It doesn't matter what the NS teacher's accent is.

A junior: The NS teacher should not have accents. Our level is already pretty low, and how can we understand a teacher with accents?

Another junior: the NS teacher's nationality is not important, but the accent is. Their English should be easy to understand, like Andy's (one of the NS teachers), who speaks slowly and uses easy vocabulary. Teacher G speaks too fast, and many sounds are stuck together. He has some accents, and I have problem understanding his words. I think understandability is the most important, easy to comprehend.

The dichotomy of standard English and English with understandable accent is problematic in light of the view. Presumably many students regard standard English, or the most popular American English as the most understandable accent. And under the priority of understandability, the speed and vocabulary the NS teacher uses may play an even more significant role than accent, which is very hard to define or categorize.

5. Discussion & Pedagogical Suggestion

Taiwanese students and parents used to define native-speaking English speakers by their race or the color of skin. Affected by globalization, parents and students are more or less changing their impression toward native-speaking English teachers. Because in the past the translation-grammar method prevailed in Taiwan, the need for native English teachers was lower than it is now. The emphasis was on assessment and exams, students in Taiwan failing to apply English in communicative situation with the same skill.

What elements influence learner's achievement in language learning? What factors motivate student interest in language learning? In our study, students deem foreign teachers are indispensable. For most students, foreign teachers should possess a good sense of humor, standard or understandable accent and pronunciation, and better interaction with students. However, their initial attitude toward foreign teachers has changed. One of the seniors noted that foreign teachers offered them a practical chance to practice English. But, she also complained that foreign teachers seldom corrected their mistakes while they were involved in their group discussion. They expected more interaction between them and foreign teachers. In contrast, foreign teachers expressed their disagreement, saying that most of the students were passive and not enthusiastic enough to interact with them. There seemed to exist a certain misunderstanding between teachers and learners.

In the very beginning, most students took for granted that they could learn more from foreign teachers than from local teachers. According to their own experience, most expressed different levels of uneasiness and lack of confidence when facing foreign teachers. Students rarely felt this way when facing non-native English teachers. They expected native English teachers teach "real" and "authentic" English, namely the accepted standard English. Foreign teachers were also more popular because of their appearance, way of talking, and flexible teaching approach. (Norton, 1997; Tang, 1997) The reality, however, is very different in terms of teaching approach, teaching attitude, and knowledge of English.

For NS teacher to teach better and local students to learn more, the expectation gap between NS teachers and local students needs to be bridged. This can be done in a myriad of policies and measures. Here we suggest three possible ways to amend this perceptual deviance that may harm the teaching and learning process. First, universities and high schools should consider how to interact with NS teachers in an orientation meeting for incoming new student before any course begins if there are NS teachers working for the institute. They should also offer training sessions for NS teachers who have little experiences teaching students from a different culture. Second, the school might consider having a NS teacher team up with a local teacher or teaching assistant to make the instruction more effective. Third, both NS teachers and local teachers are suggested to rethink their roles and adjust self-expectation as the world changes rapidly.

The most direct way to close the conceptual gap between the teacher and students is to take time to discuss it. One reason why this stereotype exists in the first place may be the lack of open information that students receive. Many students have little experience interacting with foreigners. Thus, a lot of the misconceptions students have come from biased messages in the media and traditional rhetoric about foreigners. As the survey result indicates, almost half of the students no longer deem the nationality and accent of a NEST important. The environment has changed, and more students are getting into contact with foreigners. If offered the opportunity, these students can provide first-hand experience and fairer impressions for others who still hold to the old stereotype. While some clarification from teachers helps, the testimony from their peers is more powerful and effective. If the department or the school is able to include in its orientation a discussion of this issue, such gap in understanding would be greatly bridged. Seeing each teacher as a unique individual and accepting all other traits of the teacher-- such as race, gender, and language without forming predetermining perception from these traits-- is the underlying norm that the orientation intends to help students adopt. On the other hand, new NS teachers might also carry certain stereotypes about Taiwanese students, such as being obedient and lacking opinions, and these misconceptions also need to be clarified as well. The educational and societal environment in Taiwan has gone through drastic transformations in the past two decades; as a result, students may grow up in very different contexts. While more cultural understanding from NS teachers would definitely benefit teaching and learning, treating each student as a special human being is a must for every teacher.

Simultaneous team teaching involving a NEST and a local instructor has proved to be effective in international school settings (Pardy, 2004) and has been implemented in TEFL or TESL situations, particularly in Japan (Tajino & Tajino, 2000) and Hong Kong (Lai, 1999). The idea, which has been around for decades, has not caught on because of the controversy surrounding team teaching (Benoit, 2001). At secondary level team teaching may be too radical for most schools, but at the tertiary level, it is certainly realistic to have a native-speaking instructor and a local graduate student as the teaching assistant, who handles the administrative works and provides necessary supplementary explanations. Teaching assistants are common in colleges, and with a local TA assisting the NEST should be able to overcome the

unfair expectations (few assignments and tests, relaxed atmosphere for motivation) from the students.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study reveal that students' perception toward NS teachers is mixed. Admittedly, NS teachers are recognized as assets to English learning, but they are also advised to adjust to the changing teaching/learning environment. Language learning and teaching are closely related for both teachers and students. An intercultural language teacher needs to be prepared to adjust her/his role from a trainer to a trainee. S/he intends to educate learners towards international and intercultural learning should be international and intercultural learners her/himself. Learning and teaching a foreign language, for both teachers and students, implies a degree of intercultural learning. Possessing this attitude will facilitate both foreign teachers and local students to increase the learning and teaching efficiency. Thus, how to improve teachers' personal weakness and take advantage of their own strengths is one of the crucial issues for any teachers of different culture.

7. Limitation of this study

This is a small-scale study, with limited samples and participants. However, the main goal of this study is to present one of the many ESL/EFL contexts in Taiwan. The results of this study will only reflect a tiny portion of Taiwanese students' perception toward native English teachers. Approximately one third of the participating students had never been taught by a NEST before they studied in the university and they usually had only one or two courses taught by a NEST each semester, so most of the students had relatively little knowledge of NESTs. It is expected that more contact and knowledge of NESTs will change how students perceive them, but we do not have the data to support the claim. Other Taiwanese students may have different expectations toward NESTs. The same applies to other NESTs in Taiwan, who may see their students differently.

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Appendix I Questionnaire & Result

Survey on the expectation of native-speaking teachers (NS teachers)

Year: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior Gender: Female Male

●Do you think it necessary for our department to have native-speaking teacher? No Yes, we need _____ (write down the number of native speaking teachers needed.)

●Is the nationality of the NS teachers important? No Yes, I hope their nationality is _____

Question	Average	Std.	interpretation
In your expectation, NS teachers’ speaking speed should be (1 slowest 10 fastest) Please write down the number between	6.05	1.73	Normal speed
In your expectation, NS teachers should encourage the students (1 once in a while 10 all the times)	8.22	1.96	Much encouragement
In your expectation, the teaching materials by the NS teachers should be (1 easy 10 hard)	5.60	1.78	Medium difficulty
In your expectation, NS teachers’ teaching style should be (1 impromptu 10 following syllabus strictly)	4.32	2.51	A bit flexible
In your expectation, NS teachers’ accent should be (1 doesn’t matter if understandable 10 standard)	6.28	3.34	Mixed expectation
In your expectation, the atmosphere in the NS teachers’ class should be(1 solemn 10 relaxed)	8.38	1.91	Relaxed atmosphere
In your expectation, NS teachers should have (1 more lectures & less activities 10 more activities & less lectures)	6.36	2.45	A bit more activities
In your expectation, NS teachers should pay attention to grammar (1 a little bit 10 very much)	5.62	2.40	Adequate grammar
In your expectation, NS teachers should pay attention to your pronunciation (1a little bit 10 very much)	7.58	2.10	More pronunciation corrections

In your expectation, NS teachers grading should be (1 generous 10 strict)	4.83	1.99	Normal
In your expectation, NS teachers should grade based on (1 totally effort 10 totally proficiency / ability)	4.30	2.16	A bit more effort
In your expectation, NS teachers' attitude toward the students should be (1 maintain the authority of a teacher 10 like friends)	8.33	1.90	Friend-like relationship
In your expectation, the amount of assignments given by NS teachers should be (1 very little 10 much)	3.40	1.83	Few assignments
In your expectation, NS teachers should give a test (1 very rarely 10 frequently)	2.86	1.71	Few tests

Table 1. Number of participants

Class	Number of Students	Number of Respondents	Number of Interview
Freshman	47	35	6
Sophomore	33	29	6
Junior	43	42	6
Senior	40	1	1
Total	163	112	19

Table 2. Background of NS teachers

Participant	Sex	Nationality	Years of Teaching Experience
Andy	M	Canada	6
Gary	M	Bolivia	2
Tom	M	U.S.A	3

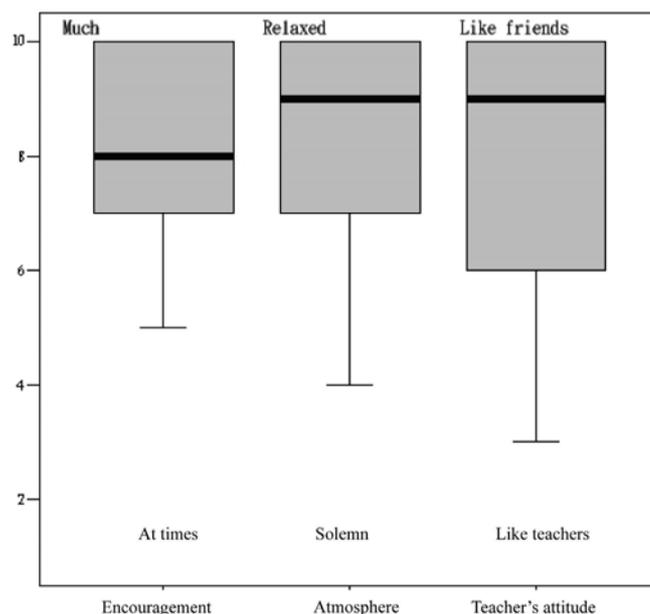


Figure 1 Students' strong expectation on NS teachers' attitude

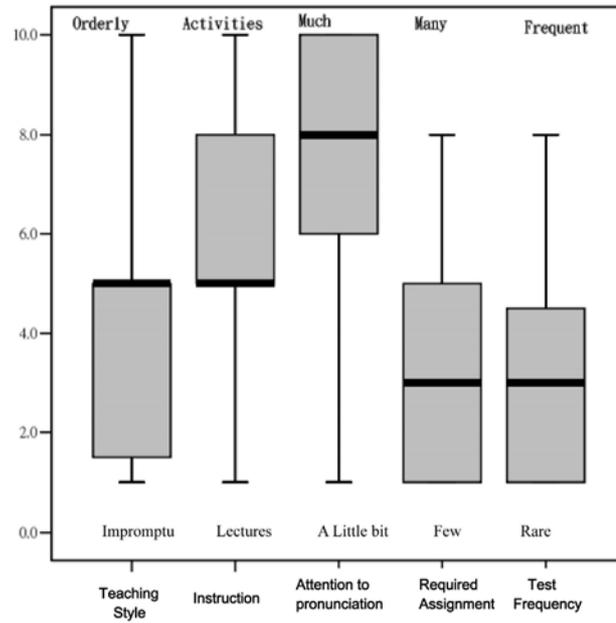


Figure 2. Students' expectation

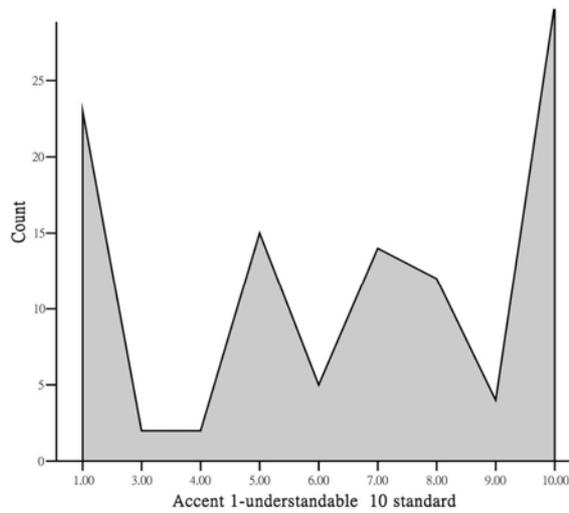


Figure 3. Students' attitudes toward accent