

## Taiwanese University Students' Perceptions Toward Native and Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers in EFL Contexts

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English has evolved into the most widely learned and internationally used language because for the increasing numbers of learners in the globalization process. With the growing demand of English education, the competencies of English teachers as Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) and Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) have become a significant matter of discussion. The purpose of this study was to investigate Taiwanese English as a foreign language (EFL) students' perceptions and preferences toward NESTs and NNESTs who hold a degree from a country where English is the dominant language through addressing the differences in their English instruction. This qualitative study consisted of 20 participants. Two open-ended questions were investigated and analyzed. The findings revealed that the participants held an overall preference for NESTs over NNESTs; nevertheless, they believed both NESTs and NNESTs offered strengths and weaknesses in their English instruction. The characteristics that were perceived to be disadvantages of one group appeared to be advantages of the other. For example, NESTs were considered more difficult to communicate with by the participants, while NNESTs were believed to have limited English proficiency.

In the 21st century, English is no doubt the most commonly spoken language (Foley, 2006; Jeon & Lee, 2006). As a global language, English has attracted a dramatic number of people to learn English as their second or foreign language during the past several decades (Block, 2002; Crystal, 2003; Holliday, 2005; Nunan, 2001). According to World Languages and Cultures (2010), the importance of learning the English language in the global market include: (a) increasing global understanding, (b) improving employment potential, (c) improving chances for entry into colleges or graduate schools, (d) expanding study abroad options, and (e) increasing the understanding of another culture. However, the next question that springs to mind is: Do NESTs really perform better than NNESTs in English Language Teaching (ELT)? Phillipson (1992) introduced the phrase "native speaker fallacy," which Mahboob (2005) defined as the "blind acceptance of native speaker norm in English language teaching" (p. 82) to deny the mystery of the ideal teacher of English as a native speaker. Also, Medgyes (1996) questioned the claim, "the more proficient in English, the more efficient in the classroom" (p. 40), since successful language instruction is also influenced by other variables such as experience, age, gender, personality, enthusiasm and training. Based on these aforementioned studies in this paragraph, one should not make a conclusion that NESTs are better English instructors than NNESTs in ELT simply because NESTs have English as their mother tongue.

However, not much research has been completed to evaluate the process and output of language teaching by NESTs and NNESTs from EFL students' points of view. The aforementioned studies have overlooked the fact that the group of NNESTs, in fact, can be divided into two subgroups: NNESTs who hold a degree from a country where English is the dominant language and NNESTs who

do not hold a degree from a country where English is the dominant language. This study, therefore, synthesized the above knowledge gaps and aimed to provide a comparative investigation to Taiwanese EFL university students' perceptions and preferences toward NESTs and NNESTs who hold a degree from a country where English is the dominant language by addressing the differences of their EFL teaching. The positive or negative experiences of those students while learning from NESTs and NNESTs were also examined in the study.

### Literature Review

**Native vs. Non-native English speakers.** Modiano (1999) indicates that the ability to use English in an appropriate and effective way illustrates whether or not someone is proficient in speaking English. In other words, "nativeness should not be related with birth, because birth does not determine proficiency in speaking English" (Al-Omrani, 2008, p. 27). Al-Omrani (2008) notes five features that could determine whether someone is a native English speaker or not (p. 28):

- The linguistic environment of the speaker's formative years.
- The status of English in his/her home country.
- The length of exposure to English.
- His/her age of acquisition.
- His/her cultural identity.

As the English language expands all around the world, the term "nativeness" is actively discussed by researchers. In general, it delineates "who is a native speaker of English and who is not" (Al-Omrani, 2008, p. 25). According to Braine (1999), Ellis (2002), and

Mahboob (2004), there is no precise definition for “native speaker,” because people cannot empirically define what a native speaker is. In this study, the researcher referred to English teachers who acquired English as a first language and spoke it as a mother tongue as native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), while English teachers who spoke or acquired English as a second or foreign language were referred to as non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs).

### The Controversy of the Native Speaker Ideal

There is a stereotype in English instruction that a native speaker by nature is the best person to teach his or her native language. The myth of the idealized native speaker originated from Chomsky (1986). He believed that “linguistic theories primarily explained the actual performance of an ideal native speaker who knew his language perfectly and was not affected by such irrelevant grammatical elements as a distraction, a lot of interest, or attention in a homogeneous speech community” (Liaw, 2004, p. 36). To be more specific, he viewed grammar of a language as “a description of the ideal speaker-hearer’s intrinsic competence” (p. 4) that coincided with the linguistic intuition of an ideal native speaker. The native speaker, thus, was viewed superior in the English language; on the other hand, a non-native speaker, whose native language was one other than English, bore the negative stereotype and experienced a disadvantage in terms of recognition and employment (Bae, 2006).

Other factors such as teaching experience, professional preparation, and linguistic expertise were equally important to represent a good foreign language teacher model. Medgyes (1992) claimed that NNESTs were effective and should be equally likely to reach professional success in English instruction. Phillipson (1992) argued the following:

NESTs may, in fact, be better qualified than native speakers, if they have gone through the complex process of acquiring English as a second or foreign language, have insight into the linguistic and cultural needs of their learners, a detailed awareness of how mother tongue and target language differ and what is difficult for learners, and first-hand experience of using a second or foreign language (p. 15).

Furthermore, non-NESTs were valued as suitable models of successful second language learners (Cook, 2005; Lee, 2000) and were sympathetic about the challenges and stress faced by students struggling to master the L2 themselves (Arva & Medgyes, 2000). Medgyes (2001) explained that both NESTs and NNESTs could be equally good teachers; however, NNESTs could further “provide a better learner

model, teach language-learning strategies more effectively, supply more information about the English language, better anticipate and prevent language difficulties, and be more sensitive to their students” (p. 436).

### The Strengths and Weaknesses of Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) and Non-native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs)

There have been debates on whether NESTs are better language instructors than NNESTs, and no agreements have been reached on this controversial issue. Even so, the strengths and weaknesses of NESTs and NNESTs have been examined and documented in the field of ELT. Regarding the positive aspects of NESTs, Villalobos Ulate and Universidad Nacional (2011) noted that NESTs included the following characteristics: “(1) subconscious knowledge of rules, (2) intuitive grasp of meanings, (3) ability to communicate within social settings, (4) range of language skills, (5) creativity of language use, (6) identification with a language community, (7) ability to produce fluent discourse, (8) knowledge of differences between their own speech and that of the ‘standard’ form of the language, and (9) ability ‘to interpret and translate into the L1’” (p. 62).

### Methodology

The study was aimed at exploring Taiwanese university students’ perceptions and preferences toward their Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) and Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) in English teaching and learning. The researcher consulted three NNESTs in English related programs to ensure questions in the questionnaire covered the research scope and collected qualitative data from the three open-ended questions. The process of research involved semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Selection of participants was conducted via purposive sampling. Creswell (2009) stated that “phenomenology research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the lives of individuals and the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 3). Therefore, the philosophical approach taken in this research leans deeply towards phenomenology; the procedure requires that the researcher understands the given experiences by studying a small number of participants. All the six participants had learned English in EFL contexts for more than nine years and had the experiences of learning English from at least five NESTs and five NNESTs. Furthermore, the researcher applied a multiple data collection method to reach an in-depth perspective of the participants’

positive or negative learning experiences they used had in the classroom were examined. The students were asked the following questions:

1. Have you ever had any positive or negative experiences while learning English from NESTs? Please provide your personal experiences.
2. Have you ever had any positive or negative experiences while learning English from NNESTs? Please provide your personal experiences.

### Findings and Discussion

The answers to the two open-ended research question were derived from the two open-ended questions covering three main themes: (1) pedagogical aspects, (2) teaching styles, and (3) motivation and anxiety. More precisely, the first theme, pedagogical aspects, was divided into five subcategories: oracy, writing, grammar, vocabulary and culture. After reading the participants' responses, the codes that were used in oracy section included accent, fluent, and accurate pronunciation. The codes applied to the writing section were writing style, comprehension, and feedback. Grammar rules and Chinese support were the codes utilized in the grammar section. For the vocabulary section, the codes included current words, Chinese explanations, and test-oriented educational system. The codes applied to the culture section were American life and less western culture input. Furthermore, the researcher utilized the codes of interaction, discussion, English only teaching style, good modeling, and Chinese facilitated teaching into the second theme, teaching styles. Finally, the codes used in the third theme included: interesting, relaxed classroom atmosphere, encouragement, understanding of students' needs, responsible, and boring.

#### Theme One: Pedagogical Aspects

All respondents (n=20) in the two open-ended questions observed that NESTs and NNESTs had good English proficiency in teaching different English language skills. This could be divided into five main areas: (1) oracy, (2) writing, (3) grammar, (4) vocabulary, and (5) culture.

**Oracy.** In regard to oracy, NESTs were viewed as fluent speakers with an accurate English accent. Many participants (n=12) believed taking oracy courses with NESTs helped them not only practice their pronunciation and English-speaking skills, but also observe various phrases and constructions that native English speakers used when they spoke. By using standard English, NESTs were most likely to help

English learners be more acquainted with the fluent, accurate pronunciation of English. For example, one intermediate student responded, "I have experienced several NESTs who were capable of checking my errors related to word stress and intonation [in pronunciation]. I was able to avoid the errors next time during communication." Besides, learners could benefit from this positive feature of NESTs by recognizing their own errors of pronunciation and avoiding those errors to reduce the misunderstanding of native English speakers during communication.

Furthermore, few participants (n=3) considered they gained more opportunities to practice speaking and listening skills while taking an oracy class with NESTs. Benke and Medgyes' (2005) study supported this finding. They found that most NESTs encouraged learners to speak English; hence, learners were forced to stay in an English only setting. An advanced level respondent explained: "My speaking and listening skills improve a lot when I learn English in an English only classroom." There was only one negative aspect regarding NESTs' oracy classes: the high speed of NESTs' speech. These participants experienced difficulties in English learning since their NESTs' speech was too fast to follow.

One positive learning experience in regard to taking oracy classes with NNESTs was the selection of appropriate topics. Some participants (n=6) believed NNESTs were capable of picking appropriate topics with serious consideration to learners' different English proficiency levels. These choices encouraged conversation in a positive way. On the other hand, negative experiences that subjects shared mainly concerned inaccuracy in pronunciation of English and, to a lesser degree, improvement in speaking and listening skills of students. "Nonstandard" and non-native pronunciation had always been the students' main criticism of NNESTs in the literature (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005; Lee, 2000; Ma, 2009; Mahboob, 2004; Pacek, 2005). In this study, the Taiwanese accent of NNESTs was pointed out by most of the participants as a major disadvantage of NNESTs.

**Writing.** Regarding the positive learning experiences of taking writing classes with NESTs, many participants (n=12) indicated that NESTs' teaching focused on specific writing skills, which made students' writings more understandable to other native speakers of English. Moreover, the feedback from NESTs gave learners ideas about the common writing styles of native English speakers. Take an intermediate student's statement for an example. He/she claimed, "One of my NESTs asked us to be more creative and use more imaginations [imagination] on our compositions. I like to learn English writing in this way."

No negative aspect of taking writing courses with NESTs was shared by students.

Subjects' sharing of their positive experiences with NNESTs in writing courses was that they were able to use Chinese to explain what they wanted to write and discussed it with NNESTs. There were 17 participants who believed that they could express their thoughts better by using their mother tongue. A few participants (n=5) revealed their negative experiences with NNESTs related to the lack of English proficiency of NNESTs. That is, NNESTs provided the wrong feedback on students' writing assignments.

**Grammar.** One interesting positive experience that nine participants had with NESTs in grammar courses was that NESTs were perceived to be more familiar with the common grammar mistakes made by native English speakers. Hence, learning from NESTs helped learners to be more knowledgeable about the different uses of grammar in daily life. However, some participants (n=10) pointed out that NESTs could not explain grammar rules in detail. Students felt confused easily by different grammar rules such as tense, word variation, sentence structure, and so on. A beginner respondent shared, "I got more confused of [with] English grammar rules after my NEST's English illustration."

Over half of the participants (n=19) noted that NNESTs performed better in grammar teaching because they shared the first language with learners. Those respondents claimed that NNESTs in grammar courses provided them with Chinese examples to explain the rules of English grammar. By doing so, learners could have a clear image of the rules in mind and further realize how and when to use English grammatical forms precisely. However, Huang and Brown (2009) revealed that most Taiwanese NNESTs tended to apply a test-oriented educational system in grammar teaching. By doing so, the teaching of grammar was not for actual use. As a result, there were 11 participants who complained that learning grammar in that way was not meaningful to them.

**Vocabulary.** While dealing with vocabulary, many participants (n=8) shared their positive experiences with NESTs in two aspects. First, NESTs in vocabulary courses always had more current words. Besides, six respondents indicated that NESTs had authentic accent in vocabulary. That is, English learners were able to hear a native-accent pronunciation of words so they were not confused while communicating with other native speakers of English. No negative experience was shared by the participants.

About half of the participants (n=10) noted that their positive experiences toward NNESTs in vocabulary courses were that NNESTs had the advantage of providing new words with explanations in Chinese. With Chinese support in new vocabularies, English learners realized accurate meaning of each new word. One intermediate student explained, "Knowing accurate meaning of words increases the chance for me to actually apply them into

some specific fields and daily life." Nevertheless, a few respondents (n=5), especially advanced English learners, considered this advantage as NNESTs' weakness. More precisely, those participants felt more comfortable to be given a synonym or sentence in English when learning a new vocabulary. Also, 10 participants complained that the test-oriented teaching on vocabulary that was applied by most NNESTs in Taiwan was an ineffective way for them to learn new words. Students were asked to memorize all new vocabularies to pass an exam rather than actually use and absorb them. Consequently, one participant in an intermediated level stated, "I tried to memorize those new vocabulary two days before my exam; however, I usually forgot most of them on the next day following the exam."

**Culture.** More than half of the participants (n=14) who shared their positive experiences of learning American culture agreed that NESTs were more familiar with the different features of western culture. More precisely, 14 respondents claimed that NESTs provided clear answers to those culturally related questions. In addition, a few participants (n=3) considered cultural knowledge of NESTs increased learners' level of motivation. Furthermore, with NESTs' western culture input, some participants (n=16) believed they gained more understanding of the western life and environment. Take one of the beginner participants' responses for example: "I love taking American culture courses with NESTs. I learned the origin of American holidays and western customs. It was fun." No negative responses were indicated.

As for the positive aspects of learning American culture from NNESTs, five subjects mentioned that since NNESTs shared the same mother tongue language and cultural background with learners, they were able to combine both the students' cultural backgrounds and the western customs and further select appropriate teaching materials to meet learners' needs and goals. In Benke and Medgye's (2005) research, the respondents gave compliments to NNESTs on the selection of teaching materials. On the other side, Benke and Medgye's (2005) study discovered that NESTs might not be able to answer students' questions due to the differences in cultural background of the target language, which created a communication gap between teachers and students. In this study, 17 respondents did complain of having less input on western culture from NNESTs. Although these NNESTs had experienced life in the U.S., some might care less about the western culture or be unaware of its development or ongoing changes. Such a teacher might provide less cultural input in teaching.

## Theme Two: Teaching Styles

One of the teaching styles of NESTs that gained more compliments from the respondents was from using

an activity approach during class. NESTs' emphasis on learning through playing and a less textbook-bound teaching style contrasted with NNESTs' test-oriented system, and 10 students preferred the previous one. In addition, 13 participants noted that NESTs cared more about the interaction and discussion between teachers and students. Students were encouraged to question their teachers or actively share their opinions rather than being passive learners, which conflicted to what they experienced in NNESTs' classes. One intermediate respondent shared the following:

Learning English with the purpose of gaining [a] higher grade on [an] exam makes me stressed. I preferred [learning] this target language with NESTs because they integrated various activities into teaching and encouraged us to actively discuss our opinions during class.

Consequently, more than half of participants (n=12) agreed that it would be better for intermediate or advanced English learners to learn with NESTs because they had better English proficiency and eventually students could gain more opportunities to practice English.

Nevertheless, participants (n=7) found that it was comparatively more difficult to communicate with NESTs than NNESTs due to the lack of the knowledge of students' first language and Taiwanese cultural background. More precisely, without these two factors, NESTs could hardly understand students' questions and needs. Additionally, there were five subjects who reported that the English only classroom setting made learning become more complicated. Here is one of the advanced participants' responses, for example: "I have to pay more attention to NESTs' English only classes to reduce my misunderstanding of school content." Another intermediate student had a similar point of view: "NESTs used only English to explain unknown words to me, which even confused me more."

In terms of positive aspects of NNESTs, about two-thirds of the participants (n=34) noted that NNESTs shared the same first language and culture with students; as a result, they understood students' needs and were easy to communicate with them. Specifically, those participants believed sharing the first language with learners enabled NNESTs to use Chinese to explain instructions for assignments, unknown words, activities, or exams to avoid any misunderstanding of learners. Meanwhile, sharing the mother tongue with students enabled learners to ask questions and communicate with teachers without language restrictions. Furthermore, 16 subjects believed that NNESTs had gone through the same process of learning English like themselves; they were aware of the difficulties of learning a new language. In Kelch and Sanatana-Williamson's (2002) research, they found a

similar result like this study: that NNESTs were more capable of providing suitable solutions to students' learning problems.

The participants also pointed out another advantage of learning English from NNESTs. This was that NNESTs represented a good model for successful learning for students, which pushed them to make efforts to learn and further achieve high levels of language proficiency. To sum, 16 participants recommended NNESTs to teach beginning level EFL classes. By doing so, not only were teachers able to make sure of learners' understanding of instructions and feedback, but also students might have more chances to reach English language proficiency.

Two main aspects were pointed out by the participants (n=17) in regard to the negative experiences of NNESTs' teaching styles. First, NNESTs applied test-bound teaching styles and an exam-oriented educational system. Second, learners had less chance to actually practice English in class. One beginning level participant stated, "I prefer to learn English with NESTs, because I don't need to experience an exam-oriented educational system with NNESTs." Another intermediate student expressed the following: "Although the use of Chinese by NNESTs ensures my understanding of school assignments, I would like to have more opportunities to practice English in a real-life setting."

### Theme Three: Motivation and Anxiety

Some participants (n=9) showed their motivation of taking classes with NESTs. Many participants preferred taking English class with NESTs because such classes were interesting and had a relaxed classroom atmosphere. For example, one advanced student elaborated: "NESTs sometimes tell some jokes, sometimes share their life experiences, which make me feel more relaxed in class. Although I may have difficulty fully understanding the sharing in English, I still enjoy the class." Additionally, some participants (n=8) mentioned that NESTs were more patient and provided students with more encouragement while they were practicing English. One beginning level participant wrote: "NESTs will not discriminate against you just because your English is poor, instead, they will compliment you as long as you are willing to use English to communicate."

The picture was not one-sided, as 18 participants reported they experienced anxiety and heavy stress when encountering NESTs. Little opportunity to interact with foreigners might be a possible contributing factor. One beginning level student stated, "It is hard for me to communicate with NESTs because I usually felt scared and [become too] shy to use English." Another intermediate participant expressed similar

feelings: "My English is not so good. I feel [felt] disappointed easily especially when I cannot communicate with NESTs."

Some subjects (n=14) revealed that taking courses with NNESTs increased their level of motivation. The reasons included: (a) NNESTs cared more about details of the curriculum, which students were able to learn more precisely, (b) NNESTs were more responsible for their work, (c) NNESTs cared about students' distinct needs, and (d) NNESTs were easy to understand. For example, one intermediate student indicated:

I feel motivate [motivated] while teaching by NNESTs because they are very concerned about accuracy in using the language and knowing the way English is the way it is. Besides, I feel comfortable to learn with NNESTs because they are easy to understand, and we can communicate without any difficulties.

Nineteen participants considered that NNESTs were strict and gave punishment to students, which was a negative experience. In Arva and Medgye's (2000) study, the respondents believed NNESTs took their teaching more seriously than NESTs; hence, students might receive punishments if they didn't perform well on their school work. Furthermore, 12 respondents pointed out the courses taught by NNESTs were boring because of the use of textbook-bound teaching styles. Based on these two main reasons, those participants considered that taking courses with NNESTs reduced their motivation and increased their anxiety of learning English.

### Conclusion

The responses and the comments received from the participants indicated a set of positive and negative features regarding the English teaching of NESTs and NNESTs. In fact, the positive aspects associated with NESTs were related to using accurate pronunciation, having good English language proficiency, using standard English, providing opportunities to learners to practice English language, having awareness of the culture of the target language, offering more interaction and discussion during classes, and creating an active and relaxed classroom atmosphere. Due to the above positive aspects, the participants, in general, believed intermediate or advanced levels of English learners may learn better with NESTs. However, the picture was not one-sided: NESTs were criticized for being hard to communicate with, speaking too fast, being difficult to understand, having less awareness of students' needs, and increasing students' anxiety while communicating.

In the same vein, as shown in the responses, the participants reported that one of the major aspects where NNESTs were superior to NESTs was their

sensitivity to students' needs, difficulties, and problems, which were strongly supported by some previous empirical studies (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005; Lipovsky & Mahboob, 2010; Ma, 2009). Such ability may be explained by two possible reasons: (1) the sharing of the same mother tongue and the cultural background between NNESTs and the respondents, and (2) having similar experiences of the language learning process and educational system as the participants. More precisely, NNESTs had gone through the process of learning English as a foreign language, and they were perceived as typical models of successful English learners by the participants.

Since the participants in this study indicated the ability of NNESTs to select appropriate topics and teaching materials due to the sharing of the same cultural background with the learners, it is recommended that NESTs become aware about learners' cultural aspects. Meanwhile, the participants believed that NNESTs did not have enough understanding of the target language's cultural background; hence, NNESTs should increase their knowledge about various western cultural aspects as they apply to language instruction. (2) The awareness of the participants' needs and problems was seen as one of the positive features of NNESTs. In this situation, NESTs are urged to raise their awareness of learners' needs and problems to further assess students' English learning. One recommendation for increasing NEST's awareness is to analyze students' personal needs, which can be conducted at the beginning of each semester. By doing so, English teachers are able to realize and identify each learner's goal and difficulty.

Precisely, despite of the fact of the comprehensibility gap between NESTs and L2 learners, the data show that NESTs were valued as models for the accuracy of the speaking ability and natural pronunciation. Participants enjoy learning about NESTs' cultures. Even though Non-NESTs' pronunciation was considered as non-authentic and less fluent than NNESTs, L2 participants appreciated their ability in L1 code-switching skill when required. In addition, non-NESTs' capability to explain and share previous experiences on complex grammar rules was valued.

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