

Native English Speaker Teachers versus Non-Native English Speaker Teachers in King Khalid University: Myths and Realities

Merzin Alshahrani, King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

A small number of studies have addressed the debate comparing native English speaker teachers (NESTs) and non-native English speaker teachers (NNESTs). However, most of the studies focused on teacher rather than student opinions. The present study examine ESL Saudi students' perceptions of NEST and NNEST professionals/teachers in King Khalid University - to ascertain whether they are negative as many administrators believe, or more positive as found in recent academic research. A total of 60 Saudi students were asked to participate in this study. They registered in an intensive English course for medical science students, at King Khalid University in Saudi Arabia. The data were collected by asking students to write their opinions to a stimulus question. Their responses to the question were analyzed using a discourse analytic technique. The results of analysis indicated the following main findings: 1) NESTs emerged as superior in the teaching of oral skills (Speaking and Pronunciation). 2) NNESTs received the highest praise for their grammar teaching skills in the "linguistic factor" group. 3) There is a clear preference for NNESTs at all level of personal factors (Experience as a L2 learner and Affect). The majority of the participants, although they see and acknowledge NNESTs' strengths, prefer attending classes taught by native speakers. Native speakers seem to maintain an advantage over their non-native counterparts. More attitudinal research needs to be conducted to determine what specific factors are influencing the students' perceptions of both NNESTs and NESTs.

Keywords: Non-native English speaking teachers (NNEST), Native English speaking teachers, EFL.

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Introduction

It has been shown in many literature that the hiring practices of administrators, in charge of English Language teaching (ELT) programs in the United States, tend to greatly favour Native English Speakers Teachers (NNEST) over Non-native English Speakers Teachers professional (Cook, 2000; Liu, 1999; Medgyes, 1992). They justify their choices by openly claiming that their students prefer NESTs. However, in an attitudinal study conducted by Mahboob (2004), data showed that the administrators' perceptions were not grounded in students' beliefs. From the findings, it was apparent that the students who volunteered for this study did not appear to find one better than the other; instead expressing that both types of teachers had their strengths and weaknesses. Additional research has also revealed that not only do NNESTs face discrimination from ELT programs administrators, but also from students and fellow ESL professionals (Braine, 1999). Given the abundance of qualified and proficient NNESTs in the industry have these cynical opinions begun to evolve? Or do NNESTs continue to be viewed through the lens of the "*native speaker fallacy*" which pigeonholes them as inferior for everything from their accents to their physical appearance? As this negative stereotype is one that is widespread, more attitudinal research focussing on this notion of the 'idealised' native speaker needs to be undertaken.

Studies that have already been conducted on the native/non-native speaker dichotomy have established that although a negative image of NNEST does exist, professionalism is commonly cited as more significant than language background (Liu, 1999; Shin and Kellogg, 2007; Mahboob, 2004 and Mahboob, Uhrig, Newman & Hartford, 2004). This is supported by Medgyes (1992) who argues that although natives have more language proficiency than non-natives; effectiveness in teaching depends mainly on qualifications rather than just language competence. The array of opinions observed above lead us to the purpose of this study, which is to examine EFL students' perceptions of NEST and NNEST professionals/teachers in King Khalid University- to ascertain whether they are negative as many administrators believe, or more positive as found in recent academic research.

Literature Review

Few studies have compared native speaker teachers (NESTs) and non-native speaker teachers (NNESTs) to date. As what Medgyes' (2000, p. 445) believe that " On the whole, the study of the non-native teacher remains a largely unexplored area in language education". However, most of these studies focused on teacher rather than student perceptions (Hayes, 2009). In the last few years, there is an ever-growing number of non native speakers teachers and language learners (Crystal, 2002,2003). It echoes Canagarah (1999) and Samimy & Brutt-Griffler,1999). state that globally, NNESTs constitute 80% of the world's English teachers. In addition, the number of English learners is constantly increasing and NNS of English will continue to be the majority.

In spite of these facts, many ESL and EFL programs around the world prefer hiring NESTs to get jobs in their countries rather than hiring NNESTs, basing their decision on an assumption that the ideal teacher of English is the native speaker. Phillipson (1992) labeled this the "*native speaker fallacy*". This notion means that the ideal

teacher of English is a native speaker of that language. Canagarajah (1999) disagrees with this notion and states that there are hidden economic, political and ideological agendas behind the widespread nature of this assumption. Furthermore, in order to understand the relationship between the NEST and NNEST professionals in ELT, it is better to know first the non-linguistic and non-pedagogical motivations.

There are some empirical studies addressing the relationship between NESTs and NNESTs. Widdowson (1994) states that NNESTs have a privilege in learning experience but NESTs have a certain advantage in language use. Medgyes (1994) in his surveys of NESTs and NNESTs found that most NNESTs face a difficulty in language use and in their efforts to learn more of it, including vocabulary, speaking, and pronunciation. And they have less difficulty in reading and writing. Grammar was labeled by Medgyes as the NNEST's "favorite hunting range" (1994:37). Lasagabaster & Sierra (2002; 2005) found that the respondents in their surveys showed a preference for NESTs in the area of pronunciation, speaking, vocabulary and culture. These findings provide more support to those from Medgyes's (1994) surveys, reported above, of teachers.

Method

Study site

At King Khalid University where this study was undertaken, the recruiters market the school overseas as qualified native-speaking teachers only. However, this appears to be an advertising ploy, as they do employ a handful of qualified nonnative teachers as well. Administrators say that if they openly admitted to the latter, the school's attendance rate would significantly drop. This native speaker policy was instilled because in the past there were ongoing complaints about the high number of nonnative speaking teachers on staff. Students claimed that they had not travelled all this way to be taught by someone who was also a learner of English, which is why the bulk of the teachers are now native speakers.

Participants

As part of these programs, students receive a total of 4.5–5 hours of classroom instruction daily, for a period of six months with the option to continue, which the majority tend to do. The institute employs both native (majority) and non-native (minority) English speakers as language instructors, and the students receive instruction from both. They are, therefore, familiar with having NNESTs in Australia as well as their home countries.

A total of 10 adult students, from various language backgrounds, were asked to participate in this study. Although the language proficiency of the students does vary, they can be roughly placed on a continuum between upper-intermediate and advanced levels. In addition, limited biographical information about the students was obtained including: age, home country, mother tongue, years of English instruction, level at the current institute of study, and past experience with a nonnative teacher.

Instruments

In order to collect students' attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs, all students (60) registered in an upper-intermediate EAP course, at English institute in King Khalid University, were invited to write their opinions to a given stimulus question designed by Mahboob (2004).

Some students think that only native speakers can be good language teachers. Others think that non-natives can also be efficient teachers. What do you think? Please feel free to provide details and examples.

Data Analysis

Following Hyrkstedt and Kalaja (1998), students' responses to the question were analyzed using a discourse analytic technique. In line with Mahboob (2004), the 60 essays were first read independently by two readers. No a priori categories were used in the analysis of the essays, although the categories which emerged as a result of the analysis were compared to those which surfaced in the study carried out by Mahboob (2004). Each reader also coded every essay individually using different colour highlighters for the assorted types of comments they deemed significant. The readers then got together to generate and label a list of categories of student comments about both NESTs and NNESTs.

Results

Owing to time constraints, the number of participants in this study is too low to make broad generalizations from the findings. It is however a good starting off point that can be expanded to verify if a larger group of informants would corroborate the results. From the data analysis, two broad groups of categories encompassing 5 individual categories emerged. The first group labelled "linguistic factors" included "oral skills", "grammar", "vocabulary" and "culture". The second group "personal factors" included "experienced as a second language (L2) learner and "affect". The results of the analysis are presented next.

Linguistic factors

Table 1
Distribution of Comment for the Linguistic Factors

Linguistic Factors	NESTs		NNESTs	
	Positive Comments	Negative Comments	Positive Comments	Negative Comments
Oral skills	15	0	5	5
Grammar	0	0	25	5
Vocabulary	25	0	0	5
Culture	15	0	0	0
Total	55	0	30	15

Table 1 shows that there were 100 remarks spread over the four linguistic categories. There were 55 positive and 0 negative statements about NESTs and 30 positive and 15 negative comments about NNESTs. The following are the results.

Oral skills

The category of “oral skills” was composed of 25 statements concerning speaking and pronunciation. NESTs emerged as superior in the teaching of oral skills. There were 25 statements in this category, 15 of which discussed the role of NESTs, while the other 10 were concerning the role of NNESTs in teaching this skill.

All 15 students’ comments regarding NESTs were positive, while NNESTs received 5 positive and 5 negative comments. In most cases, students stated that NESTs were good models for pronunciation and spoke more naturally than NNESTs. The following statement from one of the essays exemplifies the notion of NESTs as pronunciation gurus:

“...also have real pronunciation and they know idioms and collocations than non-native speakers.” (Student #16)

“...if students are study in high level, they need to learn about...special pronunciation...natives are better than nonnative teacher.” (Student #25)

When interviewed, the students stated that by *real pronunciation*, they meant that they knew how to correctly say things and could therefore explain and help them learn to read and utter words accurately. The above 2 statements show that NESTs were preferred as teachers of oral skills given that “they are more natural than non-native speaker about use-English” (Student #1). These findings corroborate research by Mahboob (2004) and Arva & Medgyes (2000) which both found that NESTs communicative abilities are seen as their forte by NESTs and NNESTs alike.

In comparison to NESTs, NNESTs’ oral skills received mixed reviews. On the one hand, out of the 2 comments, 1 was positive and 1 was negative. The positive comment expanded on their precision and speed when speaking, which is exemplified in the following comment:

“...they speak correctly and slowly. So I can understand easily.” (Student #9)

On the other hand, NNESTs were criticized for using words out of context, and being unaware or unsure of the exact meaning of certain words:

“But sometimes they use the words not influence.” (Student #6)

Grammar

As in Mahboob’s (2004) study, NNESTs received the highest praise for their grammar teaching skills in the “linguistic factor” group. There were 30 comments in this category all geared towards NNESTs, 25 of which were positive and 5 of which

was negative. The complete lack of comments for NESTs can lead us to believe that either the students deem that NESTs have weak grammar skills, or that they do not associate grammar skills with NESTs whatsoever. The latter could be a perception they have been fed by recruiters and administrators, motivating them travel to inner circle countries to improve their oral skills with NESTs whose communicative approach focuses on pronunciation and speaking while avoiding grammar. If one is constantly told that these native-speaking teachers do not teach grammar, then they could possibly not notice when it is taught to them using different means than the ones they are accustomed to, in turn not associating grammar with NESTs. The factors affecting students' perceptions in this respect need to be further researched. The strength of NNESTs in teaching grammar is exemplified below by a student who clearly favours NNESTs over NESTs:

"...they are enable to advise and teach in non native speakers perspective. Such as, the concept of past sentence etc." (Student # 8)

The 1 negative comment below, whose meaning was clarified by the student during a personal interview, stresses that NESTs place too much emphasis on specific grammar points and not enough on sentence construction as a whole, which NESTs do better.

"...non-native speaker require to me understand about grammar, but native speaker emphasis that I remember the whole sentence." (Student #1)

This specific and seemingly artificial teaching, the student went on to explain, results in language learning that is hard to apply outside of an examination context or the classroom; implying that NNESTs do not place enough emphasis on language that can be used in the English-speaking world, whether it be with NSs or NNSs.

Personal factors

Table 2 Distribution of Comment for the Personal Factors

Personal Factors	NESTs		NNESTs	
	Positive Comments	Negative Comments	Positive Comments	Negative Comments
Experience as a L2 learner	0	0	20	0
Affect	5	0	40	0
Total	5	0	60	0

There is a clear preference for NNESTs at all level of personal factors. In table 2, personal factors were classified into two categories: "Experience as a L2 learner" and "Affect". There were 65 comments in this group. Table 2 shows that all comments are positive for NESTs and NNESTs. NNESTs received 40 positive comments while NESTs just received 5 positive comments.

Experience as L2 learner

Students' comments show an obvious privilege for NNESTs rather than NESTs in the area of experience. The total of number of comments is 20. All of them supported the idea that NNESTs are in a better position to have more experience as L2 learners because they have gone through the learning process themselves, while NESTs had acquired the language naturally. It has been claimed (Lee, 2000; Seidlhofer, 1999) that NNESTs can teach a foreign language better than NESTs because the later have not experienced the process of learning the language in the same way as their students will.

Student #5 stated that:

“Non-natives are more sensitive about learning problems of English, because they have already experienced some problems.”(Student # 5)

Another statement shows the relationship between teacher's experience and grammar. The following statements stated this:

“They “NNESTs know which part is difficult because they have already experienced difficulty to learn English and they know what is the easiest way to learn English. (Student # 6)

About 44 % of the students in this study believe that NNESTs experience in learning English as a L2 provides them with more sympathy and awareness of the learning English difficulties.

Affect

This category had the largest number of comments (45 out of 65). All of these comments were positive statements about NNESTs except 5 for the NESTs. These comments provided clear idea that NNESTs can support their students emotionally. In addition, NNESTs share their students the feeling as a second language learners. Student #33 stated that:

“Non-native speakers can understand our feeling.”

Student #49 gave another example:

“Non-native speaker teacher know how difficult to learn English.”

Lasagabster & Sierra's (2002) study of university students found that NESTs were more confident in English use, but NNESTs seen to know more about students needs.

Teacher's characteristics play great role in the success of learning process Some students pointed out that NNESTs have more positive emotional characteristics such as patience and sensitivity as second language teachers. These characteristics were exemplified in the following statements:

“ Non-native English speaker is more patient than native speakers.” (Student #1)

“ Non-natives are more sensitive about learning problem of English.” (Student #5)

“ I think that good language teacher depend on their characteristics and attention they pay to their students. (Student #9)

Widdoson (1994) stated that NNESTs share their students' attitudes, beliefs, and values in cultural atmosphere.

Conclusion

Even though NNSs constitute the majority of ELTs, they continue to be discriminated against as they are not considered native speakers, and are deemed deficient in some way – reinforcing the *native speaker fallacy*. However, this situation is evidently improving, as students and program administrators have in fact started recognising that teaching skills and training can prevail over a teacher's mother tongue. Qualified, trained, and proficient NNESTs have a lot to offer the field, predominantly in the areas of grammar, similar learning experiences, and the ability to empathize with, and understand their students. That being said, it appears that the majority of the participants, although they see and acknowledge NNESTs' strengths, prefer attending classes taught by native speakers, *“...however, I think that I suit native speakers”* (Student #2) and *“I like native speaker more that non-native speaker”* (Student #1).

At present, in King Khalid University in Saudi Arabia, native speakers seem to maintain an advantage over their non-native counterparts; as Medgyes (1992: 342) claimed, this advantage is so great that it cannot be outweighed by other factors in the learning situation such as motivation, aptitude, perseverance, experience, and education. More attitudinal research needs to be conducted to determine what specific factors are influencing the students' opinions of both NNESTs and NESTs. Although the NESTs advantage as language users continues to triumph over the NNESTs experiences as language learners, it is evident that the significance of NNESTs in ELT is no longer going unnoticed and as one student nicely expressed:

“ In my opinion, teachers' origin doesn't matter. Their teaching skill is more important” (Student # 4)

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Contact email: Mralshahrani@kku.edu.sa and Merzin2004@yahoo.com