

Advantages and Disadvantages of Native and Nonnative English-Speaking Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Extensive research has been conducted and numerous articles have been written about native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), nonnative English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), and the effectiveness of each in classroom teaching. This paper focuses on studies that concern language teacher ability. The advantages and disadvantages of both NESTs and NNESTs are discussed through consideration of structured student and teacher interviews, standardized test scores, and student essay content analysis. The aforementioned sources of information were obtained through the research studies reviewed for this essay. Overall, although NNESTs' proficiency in ESL students' first language and their understanding of cultural norms allow for ease in communication, as well as the development of a close student-teacher relationship, ultimately NESTs better facilitate English language learning because of the following four reasons: (a) students' negative stereotypes towards NNESTs can activate poor concentration and attitudes; (b) NESTs more capably elevate their students' listening and speaking skills by creating an English-only environment and encouraging authentic pronunciation and intonation via use of their native accents; (c) writing lessons taught by NESTs are considered more academically and grammatically accurate as well as more original compared to those taught by their nonnative counterparts; and (d) NESTs' style of teaching is more fun, relaxed, and flexible, creating a positive atmosphere that subsequently raises the engagement level. These reasons indicate that NESTs can better maximize productivity in the classroom (when compared to NNESTs) to ensure the path of student language learning is smooth.

Introduction

With the spread of globalization, English has become the universal language for industrialized countries across the globe. As a result, the number of English learners in China, Korea, and other non-English-speaking countries has soared in recent years (Wang & Fang, 2020). A report from the 2014 TESOL conference determined that there are currently around 1.5 billion English learners worldwide, which indicates the extent of the demand for English language instruction.

A native speaker is defined as someone who has been speaking one language as their first language since they were born and brought up (Chomsky, 1965). Therefore, native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), also known as native English teachers (NETs), are people who grew up speaking primarily English. On the contrary, nonnative English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), or local English teachers (LETs), are nonnative speakers of English. They learned English as a foreign or second language and are therefore typically less fluent than NESTs are (Braine, 2010; Chomsky, 1965; Wang & Fang, 2020). Local English teachers can use their first language (L1) to communicate with their students, while NETs are unable to speak the L1 of their students. Iwai (2011) defines English as a foreign language (EFL) as English learned by people in non-English speaking countries. For example, Korean folks who learn English in Korea are considered to be EFL learners. English as a second language (ESL) is defined as English learned in countries that primarily speak English such as the United States and England.

Through an examination of numerous research articles and studies on effective English learning, this paper indicates that ESL students respond more beneficially to NESTs as compared to their nonnative counterparts. This understanding is important in raising the productivity level of classes so that students can quickly and effectively master English. Effectiveness and productivity are measured through ESL teacher and student interviews, timed essay content analysis, and scores on special sections of the standardized Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

Native English as a Second Language Teachers

In this section, I discuss how NESTs positively impact their ESL students as well as how NNESTs can hinder student learning. Amin (1997) conducted semi-structured interviews with five minority female ESL teachers in Canada (with different linguistic backgrounds) about their perceptions of students' ideal ESL teachers (Amin, 1997, p. 580). The author determined that ESL students tend to assume that only native speakers know proper Canadian English (Amin, 1997, p. 580). Similarly, Finnish ESL students have defined nonnative accented speeches as "strange English" while embracing native varieties as "authentic English" (Pihko, 1997). Furthermore, the pronunciation used by NESTs was described by students from another study as more "real," "pure," and "orthodox," and NESTs were regarded as having the knowledge of the 'real meaning' of English (Ma, 2012, p. 292). Additionally, in Wang and Fang's research article where Chinese university students living in southeast China were interviewed, they discovered that NESTs' pronunciation is widely recognized as being more standard and academic (Wang & Fang, 2020). As a result, according to Amin (1997), nonnative ESL teachers feel discouraged by their students' stereotypical ideas of an authentic language instructor (Amin, 1997, p. 580). Students' attitudes towards their teachers based on assumed linguistic abilities can be daunting for teachers because they must strive harder to prove themselves capable of performing their jobs, even though they received the same training as teachers who seem to be native speakers. Students' unfavorable assumptions about the authenticity and competence of their teachers are not only disheartening to their teachers, but they equally influence students' actions and behaviors in the classroom—as well as their quality of learning. This makes sense because, according to Major et al. (2002), positive attitudes improve comprehension, while negative ones decrease comprehension (Major et al., 2002, p. 187). Amin (1997) also asserts that, when students label their teachers "nonnative" because of either their appearance, behavior, or accent, their teachers essentially become unequipped to deliver the skills they desire to acquire. Thus, "no matter how qualified [teachers] are, [they] become less effective in facilitating their students' language learning" (Amin, 1997, p. 581). The author reports the following: "I am constantly being challenged on the rules of grammar, and it seems to me that some of my students are waiting for me to make a mistake" (Amin, 1997, p. 581). These findings are supported by Rubin and Smith's (1990) study concerning international teaching assistants, where they determined that negative stereotypes based on foreign-accented speech prompted college students to judge instructors with heavy accents as having poor teaching skills. However, "native-speaker expertise is assumed to extend to the teaching of the language. They not only have a patent on proper English, but on proper ways of teaching it as well" (Widdowson, 1994, p. 338).

Aside from students' often biased perceptions of NNESTs and their subsequent negative interpretations of their teaching abilities, teacher accents may also play a significant role in determining the quality of student learning. Major et al. (2002) examined the effects of nonnative accents on listening comprehension and their implications in the classroom. Four groups of 100 listeners with different ethnicities, including people from China, Japan, Spain, and the United States, heard brief presentations spoken in English by speakers with varied native languages as part of a specially designed version of the listening section of TOEFL. Afterwards, the sample subjects answered simple informational questions based on the lectures. The researchers discovered that "Chinese listeners performed significantly better on lectures recorded by standard American English speakers than they did on lectures recorded by Chinese speakers" (Major et al., 2002, p. 184). This result is supported by another experiment performed by Eisenstein and Berkowitz (1981), who established that ESL learners understood standard English more easily than either foreign-accented English or working-class New York English. Besides an absence of foreign accents, another way that

listening comprehension facilitates English learning is through the creation of an authentic English-speaking environment by NESTs. According to Ma's (2012) study, NESTs can improve students' listening skills because students are essentially forced to listen to English all the time, and "the more English was used, the more effective and efficient learning was achieved" (Ma, 2012, p. 291).

While listening comprehension facilitates English learning, the influence of how NESTs and NNESTs teach writing has also been examined. In one example, 76 high-proficiency Korean EFL university students from the International Corpus Network of Asian Learners of English were separated into a group that received extensive instruction from a native English speaker and a group that received the typical education from NNESTs only. Both groups wrote essays and were provided the same prompt, time limit, and environment (Schenck, 2020, p. 1). In terms of word preference, "writing of Korean EFL learners with high NEST support was not significantly different from their native English-speaking counterparts" (Schenck, 2020, p. 9). This means that the writing styles of Korean EFL students taught by NESTs more closely resemble the writing style expected in the United States and other English-speaking countries, when compared with students not receiving NEST support. An analysis of the students' writing demonstrated that the content of the Korean group with significant NEST support was more academic due to their more sophisticated understanding of vocabulary. They used words such as "anomaly" and "diminished" and a more detailed description of content related to health issues (as per the essay prompt) through use of words like "diabetes" and "hygiene" (Schenck, 2020, p. 10). Regarding grammar, Schenck determined that ESL students who received abundant instruction from NESTs "show a heightened awareness of verb tense and agreement" (Schenck, 2020, p. 15). This view is supported by Ma's (2012) study, which ascertained that NNESTs are more likely to deliver inaccurate instructions regarding both grammar and sentence structure than NESTs.

The style of teaching that NESTs and NNESTs employ within the scope of the classroom differs drastically as well, where NESTs are seemingly more open minded about the methods they implement. According to Schenck (2020, p. 12), while Korean EFL learners who received less NEST instructions relied more heavily on "speech formulas" and "collocational knowledge", those with more NEST support were more creative and assertive in their compositions as they express their personal opinions on the validity of the argument at hand without reservations. This finding aligns with results from another study, which demonstrated that LETs prefer to use traditional and textbook-bound teaching styles over freestyle class structures. This approach is not only considered boring and inflexible by students, but it also discourages and restricts expression of their individuality and creativity. The methods employed by NESTs, however, include storytelling, sharing life experiences, or cracking jokes, thereby creating a more fun and relaxed atmosphere that welcomes originality (Ma, 2012, p. 289). Similarly, findings obtained through a questionnaire and interviews at a university in southeast China illustrate that student participants appreciated the active interactions and activities that NESTs adopt in the classroom instead of fully relying on the textbooks presented by NNESTs (Wang & Fang, 2020). This may explain why students who have had experience with NESTs feel warmer towards these teachers (Todd & Pojanapunya, 2009, p. 29).

Together, these studies have focused on the benefits of learning from NESTs as well as the drawbacks of receiving lessons from their nonnative counterparts. The most notable points discussed in these articles are as follows:

- Student perceptions of their ESL teachers based on appearance, behavior, and accent have a significant impact on their judgement of whether their teachers are native or nonnative, which, in turn, can provoke inappropriate conclusions about their teachers' English skill level and teaching ability.
- Nonnative accents can hinder listening comprehension and communication, while native accents encourage authentic pronunciation and intonation. In addition, NESTs create an English-only environment that facilitates the learning of speaking and listening skills better than a NNEST classroom environment does.
- The writings of ESL students taught by NESTs are typically more academically accurate, grammatically correct, and creative when compared to compositions produced by students whose instructors are nonnative.

- The classroom atmosphere and teaching style of NESTs are generally fun, relaxed, and flexible which encourages engagement and increases productivity. This differs from NNESTs' common choice of relying entirely on textbooks.

Nonnative English as a Second Language Teachers

This section focuses on the advantages of LETs (or NNESTs) in facilitating student learning as well as the shortcomings of NETs (or NESTs). Ma (2012) from Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia conducted a study where 30 students from three different secondary schools in Hong Kong participated in semi-structured group interviews. The participants were asked questions regarding their learning experiences with NETs and LETs as well as the advantages and disadvantages of both. According to participants, the most prominent merit of LETs is their ability to use the local language (when necessary), which enhances students' understanding of the content being taught. One student explained the concept as follows: "If you don't understand, local teachers can explain things to you in Cantonese" (Ma, 2012, p. 287). Conversely, if students ask NETs to clarify challenging material, NETs can only provide explanations in English because of their inability to speak the local language. Thus, NETs often employ even more complex English terms, which raises the confusion level for students (Ma, 2012, p. 293). However, LETs can use the students' L1 to enhance communication, which is especially useful when explaining complex linguistic items (e.g., vocabulary and grammar rules). A Japanese student described his experience in the following: "Sometimes [NESTs] can't answer my questions about grammar because these kinds of things are too natural for them, and they don't know why" (Walkinshaw & Duong, 2012, p. 6). NESTs' reduced competence in explaining basic linguistic rules (when compared with NNESTs) and their inability to speak the local language both indicate that NNESTs can more competently facilitate teacher-student communications. Additionally, a study by Major et al. (2002) determined that Japanese listeners' performance on lectures delivered by standard American English and Japanese speakers were not significantly different. In fact, for the Spanish subjects, listeners actually scored higher when hearing English lectures by Spanish speakers as opposed to those delivered in standard English (Major et al., 2002, pp. 184–185). These findings indicate that LETs' accents do not interfere with communication nor comprehension of lessons. Instead, there is evidence to suggest that local accents enhance the quality of student learning due to students' faster recognition and grasp of words spoken by LETs. Local English teacher accents (when speaking English) and their ability to use students' L1 both suggest that they can facilitate learning more effectively than NETs can.

Another advantage of LETs is their own familiarity with learning English as a second language (Wang & Fang, 2020). More specifically, LETs can more fully appreciate the difficulties of the learning process, better understand student weaknesses, and more quickly adjust to students' specific needs than NETs can (Ma, 2012, p. 288). One Chinese student declared that only local English teachers, especially the Chinese ones, can truly understand her pains since they had the same experience in college. NETs, on the other hand, never had a taste of the ups and downs of the language learning process, so they are incapable of comprehending the struggles on the most personal and fundamental level (Wang & Fang, 2020, p. 10). These sentiments were echoed by a Chinese English teacher, who claimed that LETs can empathize with students who struggle and what that exactly entails (Wang & Fang, 2020, p. 10). Relating to the topic of familiarity is LETs' awareness of local sociocultural norms, which NETs lack understanding of. University students in Vietnam and Japan reported that NETs have different values and communication styles. Thus, misunderstandings and miscommunication between students and teachers can occasionally occur because of the dissimilarities (Walkinshaw & Duong, 2012, p. 6). As a result, students claimed that they experience anxiety when encountering NETs (Ma, 2012, p. 294) and that it is easier to develop a closer relationship with LETs because of their shared cultural values (Walkinshaw & Duong, 2012, p. 6). As one Chinese ESL learner stated, "We are both Chinese," and "we [students] can treat them [LETs] as friends" (Ma, 2012, p. 289). A combination of factors, including ESL students' anxiety in the presence of NETs and the absence of an intimate bond between ESL students and NETs, prevents students from vocally asserting themselves with NETs because of worries of making a mistake. A low-level

student confessed that she was frightened to ask her NET questions, even when she could not understand the material (Ma, 2012, p. 294). Another confirmed that they could ask for favors from LETs and ask them questions without hesitation, while similar experiences with NETs could be stressful (Walkinshaw & Duong, 2012, p. 6).

Together, these studies have focused on the benefits of receiving lessons from NNESTs (or LETs) and the drawbacks of being taught by their native counterparts. The most notable points of these articles are as follows:

- Local English teachers' linguistic competence, their proficiency in EFL students' native language, and students' familiarity with local accents result in easy communication and an increase in classroom productivity.
- Local English teachers' understanding of social and cultural norms and their knowledge about students' learning difficulties allow them to better respond to student needs and develop a closer relationship with students, when compared with NETs. Both of these abilities facilitate student learning.

Discussion

Upon examining numerous articles on effective English learning, there is evidence to suggest that ESL students respond better to NESTs than they do to NNESTs. Awareness of this is important in raising the productivity level in classes so that students can master English quickly and effectively. Through a comprehensive interview with nonnative female ESL teachers in Canada, Amin (1997) demonstrated that students often form unfounded opinions about teachers based solely on race and ethnicity. Emerging from these assumptions is ESL students' belief that only NESTs understand how to speak real and proper English, implying that NNESTs are inferior in this field—regardless of their qualifications. Student attitudes about ESL teachers that are based on assumed linguistic abilities can be daunting for teachers who are labeled nonnative (and therefore inauthentic) by their students. They must strive harder to prove themselves capable of performing their jobs than teachers who appear to be native speakers, even though they received the same training. While this is disheartening for these teachers, students' actions and behaviors in their classrooms, as well as students' quality of learning, are influenced. Major et al. (2002) determined that negative attitudes directly impact comprehension and the total material that students absorb. Thus, if students perceive their ESL teachers to be nonnative and equipped with poor teaching skills, they are significantly less willing to listen, participate, and learn, which decreases overall classroom productivity.

Beyond student perceptions about whether their teachers are native English speakers (and how such perceptions influence student attitudes and classroom efficiency), teacher accents also play a key role in facilitating student learning. Major et al. (2002) examined the extent to which native English speakers and nonnative ESL listeners scored higher on a test when the speaker shared their native language. The exam used was the listening portion of a specially designed TOEFL, and participants included Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, and American students. The researchers established that Chinese ESL learners performed significantly better on the test when the speeches were made in standard English rather than in Chinese-accented English. Similarly, Eisenstein and Berkowitz (1981) discovered that ESL students found standard English more intelligible than other varieties (i.e., New York English and foreign-accented English). The results of both these studies demonstrate that nonnative accents hinder listening comprehension. In the classroom, this can provoke difficulties in communication and student delivery of inaccurate pronunciation. While many LETs have accents ranging from challenging to understand to nearly incomprehensible, NESTs are free from this problem. Therefore, NESTs can accelerate the pace of the lesson and transfer content more efficiently than NNESTs can because of the absence of a nonnative accent. In addition, because of NESTs' inability to speak the local language, classes are conducted entirely in English. Thus, students must consistently attempt to listen and convey their ideas in English. Such regular practice is imperative to learning. The more students listen to and speak English, the faster they can become comfortable with this foreign language, and the more effective learning is achieved.

Writing quality and teaching style are two other areas explored in this paper. First, Schenck (2020) examined the efficiency of NESTs and NNESTs as writing instructors through evaluating the essay content written by two

groups of Korean EFL students. One group had received extensive NEST instruction while the other had not. This division could in turn reflect the productivity achieved in the classroom with students taught by both kinds of ESL teachers. In this study, the words used by Korean EFL writers who received greater NEST instruction were similar in difficulty and variety to native English writers. Because these students demonstrated superior vocabulary choices and grammar usage, it can be inferred that NESTs (as a result of their more comprehensive linguistic knowledge and provision of extensive information about English-speaking countries' culture) can teach a more appropriate writing style and structure when compared to NNESTs. These results indicate that native speakers' class sessions are more productive and efficient, as their ESL students demonstrate a more significant mastery of the English language. Second, Wang and Fang (2020) established (through questionnaires and interviews with ESL students) that students prefer a fun and lighthearted class atmosphere with abundant interactive activities employed by NESTs over traditional textbook-bound teaching styles that most NNESTs adhere to. The latter kind of class structure was not only considered boring and inflexible by ESL students, they also said that it discourages and restricts expression of individuality and creativity. A more fun and relaxed environment means that students are more actively focused, generating high engagement and heightened classroom productivity.

Conclusion

The studies discussed in this paper examine the advantages and disadvantages of NESTs and NNESTs as well as their effects on classroom productivity. Native English-speaking teachers are praised for several reasons. First, ESL students' biased perceptions of NESTs having superior teaching ability encourages positive student attitudes and provokes increased focus and class participation. Despite this finding, it should be noted that a teacher's effectiveness is realistically better determined by a combination of their practical experience, theoretical knowledge base, and interpersonal skills (Kelch & Santana-Williamson, 2002, p. 67) than by their label as a NEST. Second, a NEST's lack of a discernible accent can facilitate communication as well as encourage the usage of authentic and accurate pronunciation by ESL students, thereby accelerating the pace of student learning. Third, writing lessons taught by NESTs are superior to those taught by NNESTs because they are more academically elegant, grammatically accurate, and creative in composition. These results indicate greater efficiency achieved via NEST instruction. Finally, a fun and relaxed classroom atmosphere that utilizes interactive activities is more commonly adopted by NESTs. Such an atmosphere increases student attention and content absorption and is considered more interesting to students than the textbook-bound teaching styles utilized by NNESTs. In the following paragraph, Wang and Fang sum up the benefits of NEST teaching:

NESTs are highly praised because of their frequent use of and good command of idiomatic English in class, accuracy in pronunciation and fluency in expressions, and provision of extensive information about English-speaking countries' culture . . . Meanwhile, their effort in preparing ample supplementary materials, attention to interactions and interpersonal communication, conscientious preparation and passion, guide for students' autonomous learning, and effective and interesting way of teaching were also fully appreciated (Wang & Fang, 2020, p. 7).

On the contrary, advantages of LETs include their proficiency in ESL students' native language and their ability to use nonnative English accents to both ease communication (especially in explaining difficult concepts) and facilitate learning. The linguistic experience of LETs allows them to understand ESL students' learning difficulties in a more advantageous manner than NETs can. Consequently, they can better respond to their students, which activates a closer bond between teachers and students, thus indirectly elevating efficiency in the classroom. However, overall, the sheer volume of evidence found in support of NESTs instruction indicate that ESL students respond better to NESTs as compared to NNESTs which helps to raise productivity in classes, facilitating the language learning process. In a world where the popularity of English-language learning continues to increase and where 80% of English language

teachers are NNESTs (Freeman et al., 2015), NESTs are in urgent demand in numerous non-English speaking countries.

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