

The Perceptions of Malaysian Students toward Native and Non-native ESL Teachers

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ABSTRACT

In countries which are placed in the “outer circle” of Kachru’s three concentric circles of world englishes, Native Speaking (NS) teachers are often looked up to as the leaders of English education. This study aims to explore the perceptions of seven local students on both NS teachers and Non-native (NNS) teachers and a comparison of their linguistic abilities. The study is qualitative by nature, employing a survey and an online interview. The study finds that most of the respondents have balanced preferences towards both teachers and are very aware of the different strengths of the NS and the NNS teachers. Teachers are judged based on their personality and abilities, not their nativity. Linguistic abilities are helpful but to most respondents they come second to the teacher’s teaching ability.

KEYWORDS: world Englishes, native teachers, non-native teachers, ELT

Introduction

English is an international language. It is used widely in international business and communication. Today, English is the language of information and communication technology (ICT) and has extended its territories to non-native speaking countries throughout the world, through the internet. Due to the growing need to equip learners with English proficiency, non-native speaker (NNS) teachers of English began to outnumber native speaker (NS) teachers. Miller (2009) also claimed that “the vast majority of English language teachers around the world are now non-native users of English” (p.176).

However, the public has generally stereotyped NS teachers as being more superior to NNS teachers. According to Clark and Paran (2007), “the NS still has a privileged position in English language teaching, representing both the model speaker and the ideal teacher. NNS teachers of English are often perceived as having a lower status than their native-speaking counterparts” (p.1). Job advertisements selecting “qualified English teachers” often mentioned the need for teachers to be native speakers. This bias misrepresents qualified English teachers who are raised with English language as their first language but unfortunately are not from a native speaking country or native speaking ethnic descent. Contrary to the NNS teacher, the NS teacher, based on Kachru’s (1992) concentric circle, also happened to be associated with First World nations (e.g., the UK, USA, Canada and Australia). Such background gives the speaker an added level of prestige.

Background of the Study

English in Malaysia

Malaysia is placed in the “outer circle” or Kachru’s three concentric circles of world Englishes. The “outer circle” is for countries which were once colonized by the British. Therefore, English is placed as a second language in Malaysia and according to the Malaysian educational policy, it is also taught as a second language. Most students who reach the tertiary level have at least a minimum of 11 years of formal English education in primary and secondary schools.

Native vs Non-native

In the past, “nativeness” of the teacher is viewed as the supremacy of the educator, so much so that it has become a belief that they are better than the NNS teachers. Kachru (2005) even explained this phenomenon stating that: “This myth (of native supremacy) has over the years developed into linguistic apartheid or racism.” (p. 3). Rajagopalan (2005) brought up a concern, “Native speaker is the final criterion of matters linguistic: his verdict settles all disputes, be they about sentences, linguistic postulates, innate ideas, or what have you” (p.283). Philipson (1992) further explains that perceptions about the supremacy of a NS teacher are just a fallacy because there is no “scientific validity” to prove the fact that NS teachers are better than NNS teachers.

Mahboob’s (2004) study found that students are aware of the different strengths of a NS teacher and an NNS teacher. Recurrent themes are like NS teachers are good at teaching oral skills, vocabulary and culture, but weak in teaching grammar and adequately answering students’ questions. On the other hand, NNS teachers are good at teaching literacy skills and grammar, and are more empathetic to second language learners’ needs. He concluded that “students are not naïve and do not necessarily buy into the ‘native speaker fallacy’” (pp. 142-43).

Many studies support Mahboob's (2004) findings that the NNS teacher's second language learning experiences help students who are learning the language as a second language. Pacek's (2005) study claims that students find NNS teachers more sensitive to their problems. The ability to empathize makes them more discerning teachers. In McNeill's (2005) study on 65 teachers, he found that NNS teachers are better at predicting vocabulary problems in students than NS teachers. Likewise, Ling and Braine's (2007) study on 420 students found that these students favour NNS teachers because they share the students' cultural background and are more aware of language learning difficulties.

Besides going through the similar paths the L2 student has gone through, the NNS teacher is also more linguistically equipped when it comes to grammar and syntax rules (Reeves, 2009). This is especially important because an effective language teacher would understand what kind of errors or mistakes students are likely to make, identify those mistakes and give an explanation to address them. According to Lantolf and Johnson (2007), due to the "spontaneous" learning and understanding of the language, a native speaker does not necessarily know how to explain why a sentence is ungrammatical. On occasions like these, a typical response might just be "because it sounds wrong, or I just wouldn't say it that way" (p.880). The NS teacher does not usually have a conscious linguistic knowledge just because the teacher grew up in a native environment.

The NS teacher, on the other hand, was found to be more favoured in relation to their pronunciation and guidance in speaking activities. Most also favoured native-like accents. Findings of Yang and Kim (2011) note that students prefer NS teachers for speaking activities. They claim that it is entirely a better experience as compared to going through those activities with an NNS teacher. Most learners are more willing to learn from the NS teachers because of communication and interaction. Similarly, findings of Jamal, Ziad and Hibah (2016) on 120 Palestinian students in relation to listening abilities show that they generally have positive attitudes towards both teacher types but prefer NNS teachers.

According to a review by Suriati Jusoh et al. (2013) on 16 related and selected journal articles and unpublished theses from 2002 to 2011, there is a similar pattern in non-native learners attitude towards NS and NNS teachers. They are positive towards both NS and NNS teachers. The review results are consistent with the findings that NS teachers are better at teaching pronunciation and speaking skills whereas NNS teachers are more emphatic. They view NS teachers as role models and NNS teachers as interpreters. Interestingly, most feel collaborative teaching, which means both NS and NNS teachers are involved in teaching them, would produce a more effective language learning experience.

The issues of native teachers vs. non-native teachers were first brought up by Medgyes (1992) in the early 90s in the United Kingdom. However, these studies were only replicated and further researched in the United States about a decade later, which is around 2005. These studies, according to Medgyes' observation, take on two fields, which are self-perceptions of NNS teachers, and students' perceptions of NNS teachers. Most of these studies are based in native speaking countries. However, NS vs. NNS studies are only now growing in non-native speaking countries like Malaysia.

Problem Statement

NS teachers are respected and looked highly upon by many, especially in Asian countries. The Malaysian government is willing to invest in native teachers because they are seen as the

better teachers in the language as compared to our own non-native teachers. Between 2013 and 2014, English teaching assistants from the United States were imported to aid English language teaching in Malaysia (Edwards, 2013). In later part of 2015, teachers from Cambridge, England were also imported. Native speakers hired with an expatriate salary are certainly a very expensive national investment. This continual trend only highlights an unchallenged perception and probably blind faith towards the NS teachers which causes questions to arise regarding how effective these NS teachers are compared to the local NNS teachers.

The main purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions of Malaysian ESL learners towards NS and NNS teachers. The findings will give an insight on the students' perceptions towards their teachers.

Therefore, the research questions for this study are:

- 1) What are the general perceptions of Malaysian ESL learners about NS teachers and NNS teachers?
- 2) What are the perceptions of Malaysian ESL learners about their approachability?
- 3) What are the perceptions of Malaysian ESL learners about their linguistic knowledge in English?

Methodology

Design of the study

This study is a qualitative study in which the respondents first answered a survey questionnaire of 15 questions. After filling in the survey, the respondents were interviewed to triangulate the content of the survey. The interview also clarified certain issues that were not elaborated enough in the survey and provided a more descriptive and meaningful data for this study.

Respondents

Finding participants for a research like this can be quite difficult. This is mainly because of the sensitivity of the topic. In Malaysian public schools, finding a student being taught by a native speaker is rare. The gatekeepers, who consist of principals and school authorities, of the international schools and education centres, which market their services based on having "native English teachers" are very reluctant to participate in this research.

Due to the difficulty to access respondents through the institutions, "snowball sampling" is used through Facebook.com, a social network site. An online sampling was done to select respondents who "have gone through English lessons with both native and non native speakers before." These criteria can be seen clearly when various Facebook profiles are browsed, due to the openness of personal information in Facebook accounts. Profiles often state which schools and universities a person went to (Gross & Acquisti, 2005). From one connection, a respondent is usually willing to help find a friend to be the next respondent. Therefore, more respondents were recruited.

The online interviewing method agrees with the methodological approach of this research as online interviewing could be done in a considerably effective and cost-efficient manner, as Duffy, Smith, Terhanian, & Bremer (2005) put it, online interviewing could "accumulate very large volumes of interviews in a short space of time...(use) a minimum fieldwork period is often recommended for online surveys to ensure good coverage, so speed of response

becomes no more of an advantage for online than for face-to-face surveys” (p. 617). In this study, all the seven respondents who did the survey and follow-up interview have either studied in an international school or studied abroad in their undergraduate years. A brief description of their background is given in Table 1.

Table 1
Background of Respondents

Respondent	Number of NS teachers studied under	Duration with NS teachers	Origins of NS teachers	Number of NNS teachers studied under	Duration with NNS teachers
1	1	4 months	UK	14	14 years
2	1	1 year	USA	14	11 years
3	8	9-10 years	UK, Australia	4	3-4 years
4	6	8 years	Canada, Australia, UK	4	4 years
5	2	1 year	USA	-	13 years
6	1	4 months	USA	12	12 years
7	12	2 years	UK, Canada	35	13 years

Findings and Discussion

General perceptions

Respondents were asked which teacher type was their favourite in the duration of years they studied the English language. Respondents were then inquired about the main reasons why they favoured a teacher or disliked a teacher. Table 2 shows that most of the respondents favour the NS teacher. Most of the characteristics listed focused on how these teachers contributed to their learning process, their sincerity and helpfulness, their creativity in lesson delivery and how they made English fun. These characteristics are similar to those that Butler (2007) has discussed on how students often look forward to NS teachers’ lessons as they are more positive and inspiring. When asked the general question on preference, the respondents listed the teacher’s teaching style rather than linguistic ability.

The most favourite teacher, the least favourite teacher and reasons why

Table 2
Reasons for the most favourite teacher

Respondents	Native (NS) or Non Native (NNS)	Characteristics and reasons
1	NNS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive
2	NS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Took time to schedule one on one meetings to dissect details of students’ work. • Teaches fairly and clearly. • Give good advice and suggestions for improvement. • Sympathetic with struggles. • Does not exactly care about grammar yet knows “what goes and what does not”
3	NS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funny, had a sense of humour. • A friend.
4	NS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tries to engage class participation • Gave extra time (out of class) to help in lessons. • Entertaining, would act our parts of literature. • Empathetic towards non-native speakers in the class while encouraging native speakers to do extra.
5	NS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Made English fun

6	NNS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articulate • Challenges the class to take English beyond the exams.
	NS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Made English Literature change their world views.
7	NS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interesting, uses different teaching material • Makes each class unique

Table 3 shows a fair share of both NS and NNS being cited as the “least favourite teachers.” Only five respondents shared about their least favourite teacher. Reasons given are mainly the lack of professionalism and discrimination of weaker students. It is interesting to note that while some NS may be named as “favourite teachers,” students were also discerning enough to list some NS as “least favourite teachers.” NS listed under that category often seemed to be the NS who failed to reach out to “the other” students in the class. This is probably due to cultural differences. Intercultural classrooms are rather dynamic and NNS students, just like NNS teachers, may have feelings of inferiority and tend to be more sensitive of being sidelined.

Table 3

Reasons for the least favourite teacher

Respondents	Native (NS) or Non Native (NNS)	Characteristics and reasons
1	NS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doesn't interact much with the class, especially with international students.
2	NNS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lacks a great deal of confidence. • Uncreative, uses textbooks. • Although very good at grammar (eg. word class), using the language makes no sense.
3	NNS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very boring
4	NS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mark our assignments poorly without giving constructive feedback. • Less empathetic towards NNS students and weaker students.
7	NNS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not pronounce words properly. • Always insisting she's right, does not listen to others.

Reasons why an NS and/or an NNS teacher is good

This section is only the preliminary question which leads to questions that will provide greater detail of the respondents' initial claims. Five respondents stated that both the NS and NNS teachers were good whereas two respondents claimed that the NS teacher was better. The respondents who claimed that both were good often gave practical reasons justifying why both teachers were able to “deliver” at their level based on the teacher's educational background. What qualified a teacher was not where the teacher came from but rather the teacher's personality, attitude and teaching abilities. So, a teacher was judged based to how he or she “performs”, and not the teacher's linguistic background. Some respondents also commented that English, by its very nature, is an international language so it does not matter where the teacher comes from because it is used everywhere.

- i) Respondents who claimed both NS and NNS teachers were good.

I personally believe that both NS and NNS teachers have the capacity to be great educators of the English language. Then again, it all stems back to the level of education as well as their personal usage of the language tools gained over the years.... However in experience, regardless of the types and locations of tertiary

studies one gains in his/her journey in life, the English language is a tool widely made accessible to every living person. Its capacity and growth would then be solely dependent on each person's drive for perfection or lack thereof. [Respondent 2]

Both are good – both native and non-native teachers had a good grasp of the language at the level that was taught at the time...The teachers I preferred were more engaging, approachable and put more effort into their lessons – this was variable among native and non-native teachers alike. The good teachers recognized the range of abilities among students and tailored their approach towards the individual student to maximize their learning experience. [Respondent 4]

Based on my personal opinion, I'd go with both. I solely believe a non-native teacher is fully qualified to endow students with the equal amount of knowledge (English) in compared to a native teacher. It's a language, a pure wisdom, which one can share and enlighten another despite where they are from. [Respondent 1]

Both are good but the teacher needs to be passionate about the subject they are teaching. That interest and passion transfers over to the students and it alters the way they view the subject matter. Of course the thing that both teachers had in common was a good command of the English language. Ms. Quah broke the barrier for me that only native teachers are able to deliver exciting, well put together lessons in English. [Respondent 6]

They each have their pros and cons. It really depends on their individual personality. Each person is unique and has different ways in bringing their lessons across to their students. Its all in the attitude. [Respondent 7]

However, the respondents who claimed that the NS teacher was better only mentioned that their pronunciation was better.

- ii) Respondents who claimed the NS teacher was better
NS is better because their English is better. Their pronunciation is better. [Respondent 3]

NS teachers enable me to practice my pronunciation at the same time. [Respondent 5]

Since answers produced in the survey were very brief, both Respondents 3 and 5 were questioned a little further in their interview session to verify their answers. Both respondents claimed that there were no apparent differences except for their pronunciation.

Grammar is easily taught by any race, provided that they have been taught properly. Spelling is normally not an issue. Sentence structure is generally ok, although there is the occasional hiccup with non-natives and natives alike. [Respondent 3]

Hmm. Other components like writing and comprehension, I think both can guide equally well. Just pronunciation makes the difference... especially for me I'm no good at it. [Respondent 5]

Perceptions of approachability

Reasons why a teacher is more empathetic

The question for this section is: “Which teacher do you feel is more understanding and compassionate towards your struggles in the English language? Why?” Two respondents claimed that they did not struggle in English because they already had a strong foundation in English from home whereas four respondents claimed that it was the NNS teachers who were more empathetic in their struggles compared to the NS teachers because the NNS teachers understood how it was like to learn English as a second language based on the similar experiences they went through. Respondent 2 however discussed that his choice of NNS as being more empathetic than the NS was just a general statement and we should not stereotype that because he had an NS teacher who was also very empathetic. In the interviews, Respondent 4 clarified by saying that what she means by “nuances” would be how NS teachers joke or use idioms and expressions which cannot be understood by an NNS student. One respondent, Respondent 7, however, differed in opinion. He claimed that the NS was more empathetic because they had less expectations of the NNS students’ proficiency. His claim was also similar to a claim by Respondent 4 (refer to Table 2).

i) Respondents who preferred the NNS

NNS – as they too learnt English as a second language they understand how we might not pick up English nuances as easily and comfortably as native speaker. [Respondent 4]

Obviously, NNS especially if we have the same first language [Respondent 5]

NNS because they have probably been in the same shoes where they have struggled to learn the language as well. [Respondent 6]

The NNS. This is because it is well-known amongst English educators that people who speak English as their first language lacks the full capacity of being able to fully master the language when compared to an individual who learns English as a second language. This is because the former naturally become more complacent in their lifelong mastery of the language due to the fact that English comes to them as simple as breathing air. On the other hand, through immense effort the NNS would then come to the point of mastering the essence and structure of English language as a tool. Aside from that, the NSS would also be able to approach their growth within the language more objectively compared to the NS.

(However) Hurst was the one (NS) teacher I had who was sympathetic with the struggles I had when writing my papers even though English is my first spoken language and I was good in it. This was simply because she recognized my struggle of having to unlearn and relearn this language that was a familiar to me as taking a non-registered breath. [Respondent 2]

ii) Respondents who preferred the NS

NS. They assume that you don’t know anything or your basic is weak that they let you get away with a lot of things based on their naïve assumptions. However, they also try their best to assist you and help you through your difficulties. [Respondent 7]

Reasons which made a teacher easier to communicate with

In this section, two questions asked were: “Which teacher do you feel more confident in speaking to? Why?” and “Which teacher do you feel more difficult to communicate with? Why?” Most respondents stated the NNS teacher was easier to communicate with mainly because of the NS teacher’s different accent. It made them feel uncomfortable when they were not understood or did not understand what the teacher was saying. Respondent 7 added that NS teachers also had different sets of jokes and sarcasms which often were lost in translation because they did not share the same culture. This also supported the claim made by Respondent 4 that the difference in idioms and expressions (in the previous question) used by NS teachers were hard to understand and Respondent 6 who said that the NS teacher used unfamiliar vocabulary.

- i) Respondents who claimed having more confidence and finding it easier in communicating with the NNS teachers

A non-native teacher as we share the same slang and tone. Not to mention, the same culture. A native teacher as they might not comprehend the slang and tone, in which I may end up repeating it over and over again till he/she gets it. I just feel stupid to do that (repeating), like some kind of retarded kid. It somehow makes me feel incompetent and intimidated. [Respondent 1]

I feel more confident speaking to the NNS. This is because when I speak to a NS, instinctively I become more conscience of the level of English I would be using. For example, if I were to speak to a British national, I would then switch my accentry to that of the American accent I acquired for myself while studying in the United States and forgo my natural Malaysian accent. Aside from that, the usage of words and terms would also change on my part in order to better accommodate the British national in being able to converse with me smoothly. [Respondent 2]

Am confident in speaking to the NNS because you probably will not feel as self-conscious making mistakes. Difficulty communicating? Would probably be NS because they may use vocabulary that is unfamiliar. [Respondent 6]

Confident in speaking to the NNS. This is because they share the same cultural background and vocabulary that helps in expressing my thoughts when we are conversing. Jokes and sarcasms are not lost in translation and that gives me confidence to talk more and puts me at ease. More difficult to communicate? It would be the NS. This is because we don’t really share the same cultural background and that makes some jokes and sarcasms lost in translation. [Respondent 7]

Some respondents preferred the NS teacher. Respondent 5 stated that having lived a long time in an NS country made her more used to speaking to an NS compared to an NNS (who does not belong to her own nationality) whereas Respondent 3 explained that NS teachers were much more amiable. Respondent 4 stated that she did not have problems communicating with both, however sometimes she found the NNS teachers difficult as they did not accept or understand “colloquial English.” When asked to further elaborate that in the interview, she explained that NNS teachers were more strict and rigid as compared to NS teachers. This finding also supported the claim made by Respondent 3.

ii) Respondents who preferred communicating with the NS teachers

Their (NS) teaching style makes them more like a friend. Anyhow, NS teaching and training typically is more laid back and more supportive of students. Less pressure to perform, for example. There is the option to 'have fun' more than just study and grind into the work. NNS are culturally (during my time) more rigid and less forgiving... and more likely to punish than encourage. [Respondent 3]

I'm confident with both teachers. All my teachers were approachable and made us feel comfortable when speaking to them. Sometimes the NNS is difficult – sometimes they don't accept / understand colloquial English. [Respondent 4].

The NS (American) because I have lived in the US for 8 years and of course NNS of my nationality not the other NN. [Respondent 5]

Perceptions of linguistic ability

According to the respondents in this study, the linguistic ability of both the NS and NNS teachers were sufficient to teach the English language at their level. However, many respondents strongly agreed that their differences were quite apparent. Based on the findings from both the survey and online interview, all respondents agreed that the NS teachers were better in pronunciation, speaking ability, vocabulary and cultural knowledge of the target language as compared to the NNS teachers. As for grammar, more respondents indicated the NS was preferred in the survey. However, during the interview, most of them claimed that while the NS teachers spoke in good grammar they did not teach grammar and give constructive feedback on grammar as efficiently as the NNS teachers.

Conclusion

This study has presented the perceptions of seven respondents who gave a fair and balanced view of both NS and NNS teachers. While more respondents favoured the NS teacher when first asked about their preference, most of them elaborated that it was the NNS who empathized and communicated better with them. They explained that each teacher had different strengths. Most respondents stated that they did not judge the teacher by his or her origins but rather the teacher's ability to teach, the teacher's own personality and attitude.

Comparisons made by them often focused on the identity of the teacher and the student-teacher relationship. Most did not elaborate on the teacher's linguistic ability until they were questioned. This showed that the perceptions of the students towards the teacher's linguistic ability were secondary as compared to his/her pedagogical skills. The different linguistic strengths highlighted by the respondents were consistent with Mahboob's (2004) findings in which NS teachers had better pronunciation, were good at teaching speaking, vocabulary and culture but NNS teachers were good at teaching grammar and giving constructive feedback.

However, Ortega (2009) discussed that regardless of whether attaining native-like accents is possible, it is uncommon and only few L2 learners ever accomplish that. Munro and Derwing (2011) added that achieving native-like phonological control is not a necessary goal compared to achieving intelligibility or comprehensibility. It can be concluded that whether or not an NS teacher is more effective than an NNS teacher would very much depend on the needs of the individual student. For students who have attained good proficiency in the language, as in the respondents in this study, they are obviously more ready for the top-down

approach of the NS teachers than those who do not have a good proficiency level and need constructive bottom-up kind of feedback. This study also finds that students with good proficiency levels are more adaptable to both types of teachers.

Implications and Recommendations

This small-scale study has two implications. First, hiring an NS teacher is not a necessity for students to have a better teacher-student relationship or learn the language more effectively. We have come to a conclusion that each teacher, whether NS or NNS, has different sets of strengths. Students are able to value each teacher for his or her effort and professionalism. Students are able to judge the teacher according to his or her ability and interaction with them.

Secondly, having exposure to both NS and NNS teachers may mean having exposure to different teaching styles and help vary the students' language learning experiences. As different students have different learning styles (Glonek, 2013) it is beneficial to have a variety of teaching styles to match the preferences of various learners and maximises engagement and learning. Such variety can be offered by the NNS teachers who are well trained.

This study, being exploratory in nature, raises a number of opportunities for future research, both in terms of theory development and concept validation. More research will in fact be necessary to refine and further elaborate the findings of this study. Future research could define its focus by setting a constant in its study. It can investigate student's perception of their teachers by comparing the strategies used by the NS and NNS teachers in conducting lessons with similar goals, using student participants from a constant context such as the private school or a university abroad and investigating further why the teacher acts the way he or she does. In addition since this study also finds that students with good proficiency levels are more adaptable with both types of teachers, future studies can address the perceptions of students who have weaker English proficiency.

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