What exactly are NESTs in Thailand?: Understanding among Thai Students Regarding the Concept of 'Native English Speaking Teachers' in EFL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

In Thailand, where students encounter both Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) and Non-Native English Speaking Teachers (NNESTs)—with a significant portion of NNESTs being Thai and Filipino—a gap exists in understanding how Thai students interpret the terms Native English Speakers (NESs) and NESTs. This study aimed to explore this understanding among 279 Thai undergraduate students majoring in English, ranging from 1st to 4th year, focusing on their perceptions of countries considered as NES nations and using Kachru's (1985) Three Concentric Model as a framework. It examined the relationship between students' educational backgrounds and comprehension of these terms, as well as their expectations and experiences with NESTs and NNESTs. Data were collected via a mixed-methods approach,

encompassing questionnaires and semi-structured group interviews, and analyzed using SPSS for statistical measures and *AntConc* for frequency analysis of questionnaire responses. Interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed for emerging themes. Key findings included that students identified countries from Kachru's outer and expanding circles as NES nations, in addition to commonly recognized ones such as the US and the UK. The study highlighted a correlation between the students' four-year education and their broader understanding of English. Moreover, this research found that students judge NESTs by their teaching skills and education quality rather than origin. This study underscores the importance of examining participants' preconceptions of NESs and NESTs to enhance the accuracy of future research. It also suggests potential for further research, such as comparative studies with participants in NES countries.

Keywords: world Englishes, global Englishes, applied linguistics, NESTs and NNESTs

Introduction

World Englishes contribute to the global spread and utilization of English through the lens of Kachru's 1985 model of the Three Concentric Circles, comprising the Inner, Outer, and Expanding Circles. This influential model, further elaborated upon in Kachru's later works (Kachru & Nelson, 2006), illuminates the complexities in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly emphasizing the divisions and discussions between Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) and Non-Native English Speaking Teachers (NNESTs).

These discussions persist despite the rise of Global Englishes (GE) concept, which advocates for universal ownership of English across all countries (Galloway & Rose, 2015; Al-Mutairi, 2020; Boonsuk et al., 2023). The term 'Native Speakers' (NSs) has long been under scrutiny, with debates addressing whether its definition should shift from a country-of-origin basis to one that emphasizes speakers' linguistic abilities (e.g. Rampton, 1990; Galloway & Rose, 2015).

The nuances of these debates are particularly pronounced in Thailand, which occupies a prominent position within the Expanding Circle. In the context of ELT in Thailand, Kachru and Nelson (2006) recognize the country's distinctive educational path, particularly its integration of English without a history of European colonization. This sets Thailand apart from

other Southeast Asian nations. The force of globalization, recognizing the need to connect the world linguistically, has been instrumental in English rising to the status of the world's lingua franca in Thailand (Galloway & Rose, 2015). This perspective has led to English being viewed not just as an academic subject, but as a vital tool for socio-economic advancement and integration within the ASEAN community (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2021).

Thai students' preference extends not only to Inner Circle teachers but also to foreigners with a 'white' appearance, whom they perceive as more proficient than Thai teachers. While Thai locals constitute the majority of NNESTs in Thailand, a noteworthy proportion of Filipino teachers also contribute to the educational landscape (Todd & Pojanapunya, 2009; Wongsamuth, 2015). However, research gaps exist in understanding how Thais, especially students, interpret the terms NESs (Native English Speakers) and NESTs, and whether they equate all white foreigners with being NESs.

As a result, the present research builds upon prior studies by taking a comprehensive approach, not only examining the students' attitudes toward NESTs and NNESTs but also delving into the students' understanding of the definition of 'Native English.' This is crucial as it directly relates to their accurate understanding of NESTs and NNESTs. Furthermore, the study investigates the relationship between the students' academic backgrounds and their understanding of these terms. It also explores the students' expectations, understanding, and experiences with NESTs and NNESTs, aiming to determine if there is still a prevailing preference for NESTs and white teachers.

Understanding Thai students' comprehension of these terms is critical, as it informs broader discussions on the applicability and relevance of the NESs classification in an increasingly globalized educational environment.

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Thai students interpret the terms NESTs and NNESTs in Thailand?

2. What is the connection between the students' academic backgrounds and their comprehension of these terms?

3. What are the students' expectations, perceptions, and experiences with NESTs and NNESTs?

Literature Review

World Englishes, Global Englishes and the Challenges of Nativism in ELT

The concept of 'World Englishes' (WE), signifying "the type of spread, the pattern of acquisition, and the functional domains in which the English language is used across cultures and languages" (Kachru, 1985, p. 12), is essential for understanding the global dissemination and the use of English (Kachru & Nelson, 2006). This spread goes beyond traditional English-speaking countries, illustrated by Kachru's (1985) Three Concentric Circles model, categorizing English into three groups:

1) the Inner Circle including traditional English-speaking nations where English is a native language (Galloway & Rose, 2015), consisting of five countries: the UK, the US, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand,

2) the Outer Circle encompassing regions with prolonged colonization where English is a second language, and

3) the Expanding Circle covering areas where English is a foreign language, such as Thailand, reflecting its pluricentric nature (Kachru, 1985; Kachru & Nelson, 2006). This model sets the stage for a deeper understanding of how English functions in different contexts (Seargeant, 2010).

Despite providing a comprehensive scenario on how the English language has spread globally, Kachru's model has faced criticism. For example, classifying speakers of English strictly into one of the three categories is becoming more challenging (Jenkins, 2014). Also, according to Galloway and Rose (2015), numerous individuals classified as ESL speakers actually use English as their native language. In addition, as Kachru and Nelson (2006) suggest, the diffusion of English also raises several debates, including the ownership and standard forms of English, as well as the most appropriate teaching models. While the three categories have notably established a divide between Native English Speakers (NESs) and Non-Native English Speakers (NNESs), with the former often viewed as superior to the latter, it is irrespective of their actual language skills which were not originally intended by Kachru (Jenkins, 2014).

Moreover, NNESs today outnumber NESs (Galloway & Rose, 2015), and in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), NNESTs have become the majority of teachers, surpassing NESTs (Ishaque, 2018). This shift, coupled with globalization, has transformed English into a widely used global lingua franca, transcending the borders of NES countries.

This evolution known as Global Englishes questions the idea of English being tied to specific places and distinct types, and instead illustrating that English is varied and adaptable (Galloway & Rose, 2015). In other words, while 'World Englishes' denotes the concept of English as nation-specific and geography-specific varieties, 'Global Englishes' places an emphasis on the utilization of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) by speakers from diverse nations and with various first language backgrounds (Jenkins, 2014).

Despite the increasing number, NNESTs often encounter discrimination and prejudice (Holliday, 2006; Çakir & Demir, 2013). Such biases, favoring NESTs, impact hiring practices and perpetuate the notion of English as a domain of native speakers. This preference is evident in job markets, as demonstrated by Mahboob and Golden (2013), who investigated 77 online job advertisements from ESL Jobs World. Their findings revealed that 61 of the listings exclusively referred to NESTs, accounting for 79.2% of the total.

The preference for 'white' native English teachers based on accent and fluency often overshadows the importance of teaching competency and empathy (Boonsuk, 2016). Selvi (2014) notes that despite the attention given to the NNEST movement, misconceptions persist, including the beliefs about the superiority of NESTs and the notion that identifying as a NNEST can lead to further marginalization.

Dewaele, Bak, and Ortega (2021) argue that assessing linguistic competence based on one's birth language is unjust. Research indicates that NESs may struggle with skills like writing, whereas some NNESs excel in these areas (Rampton, 1990).

Galloway and Rose (2015) recognize the fundamental issues associated with using terms such as 'Native,' 'Non-native,' 'Inner Circle,' and 'Outer Circle.' Rampton (1990) suggests that the terms like 'language expertise', 'language inheritance', and 'language affiliation' are more accurate indicators of language abilities than the ambiguous term 'native speaker'.

Booksuk, Ambele and McKinley (2021) report the shift in the Thai students' attitudes toward Global Englishes after taking a course on Global Englishes. Prior to the course, the students viewed British and American Englishes as prestigious and adopted the two varieties as the norm for making judgments on one's English language proficiency. After the course, it was revealed that the students were more aware of the importance of accepting other varieties of Englishes. In addition, they agreed on the global status of English and that English belongs to everyone.

The ongoing use of NS and NNS labels continues to hinder progress toward equity in education and research (Dewaele, Bak, & Ortega, 2021). Boonsuk, Wasoh, and Fang (2023) argue that despite the rise of Global Englishes and ELF, the ELT field still largely idolizes NESs as the ideal teachers, often favoring Caucasian teachers from the inner-circle countries. This bias results in discrimination against those not fitting these stereotypes, challenging the idea of English as a truly global language.

NESTs, NNESTs, and the Nativeness in Thailand

The majority of NNESTs in Thailand are local Thai teachers (Todd & Pojanapunya, 2009), along with a significant number of foreign teachers being Filipinos, as evidenced by the more than 5,000 Filipino teachers applying for teaching licenses in 2015, outnumbering applicants from traditional NES countries, such as American and British applicants (Wongsamuth, 2015).

Mirroring a global trend, the ELT sector in Thailand, as investigated by Methitham (2012), displays a notable bias toward hiring Western NESTs, especially those with Caucasian characteristics and accents. This inclination leads to unequal employment benefits, favoring these NESTs, while the qualified NNESTs encounter discrimination. This disparity is acknowledged in the Thai teaching community, as witnessed by the authors, where foreign teachers are typically offered higher salaries and hold a privileged position, stemming from the assumed superiority of NESs.

Such entrenched practices create an ELT landscape where NESs, particularly those perceived as Caucasian, are preferentially hired and better compensated. In contrast, teachers with darker skin tones face prejudice and unequal pay (Methanonpphakhun & Deocampo, 2016). The experiences of Indonesian EFL teachers in Thailand, as reported by Putri (2020), further emphasize the deep-seated issues of inequality, with instances of salary disparities despite equal professional treatment.

Research has delved into the attitudes toward NESTs and NNESTs, examining perceptions of their competencies, classroom management, cultural knowledge, and appearance (e.g., Ali & Jungsatitkul, 2008; Todd & Pojanapunya, 2009; Tangkawanit, 2014; Thongcharoen, 2017). The results reveal the preference toward NESTs, particularly white individuals despite recognizing the competencies of NNESTs. In terms of teaching styles, strengths, and weaknesses (e.g., Srisuwan, 2013; Khaomankhong, 2016; Wechkrajang, 2020; Somphong, 2013), the results of these studies agree that both groups of teachers were viewed positively overall. Nonetheless, NESTs are more favored in language skills, cultural aspects, and favorable personal characteristics while NNESTs are stronger in classroom management, textbook reliance, exam preparation, and local context understanding.

Recent research also presents a more complex picture of the roles and perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs in Thailand. Crank (2015) delves into the multifaceted identities and perceptions of NESTs, uncovering that while traditional views on native proficiency prevail, there is also a growing recognition of the need for comprehensive skill sets in ELT, including pedagogical, professional, interpersonal, relational, linguistic, and communicative skills. Boonsuk (2016) examines the relationship between

'nativeness' and perceived teaching effectiveness, challenging the stereotype that 'Inner Circle' native speakers are the ideal English teachers. The study concludes that a teacher's native background, nationality, first language, or appearance does not determine their teaching effectiveness, which should be assessed based on individual personal, pedagogical, cultural, linguistic, and professional characteristics.

Waelateh et al. (2019) and Boonsuk and Ambele (2020) both acknowledge the dissolution of traditional views of English ownership, asserting that effective English teaching is unlinked with the nativeness of the teacher. Despite this evolving understanding, biases in hiring practices still favor NESTs due to entrenched societal ideologies. In a study concentrating on performance outcomes, Fuangkarn and Rimkeeratikul (2020) present findings that indicate no significant difference in the English proficiency advancements made by students of NNESTs compared to those of NESTs, with some evidence suggesting NNESTs may even facilitate greater gains. Contrary to students' positive perceptions of NNESTs' teaching abilities, experts held differing views, particularly regarding linguistic skills. Namphandung et al. (2021) investigate attitudes toward Standard English, World Englishes, and the roles of NESTs and NNESTs English-speaking teachers. The study found that the participants view Standard English as synonymous with British or American English and have neutral opinions on World Englishes and the effectiveness of NESTs and NNESTs, possibly due to limited exposure to different English varieties.

It can be seen that Thailand confronts a divide between NESTs and NNESTs, with Thai students continuing to be mistaken about the meanings of both terms. While more research is shedding light on the positive perceptions of both groups and stressing the significance of teaching skills rather than native status, there remains a gap in understanding whether Thai students fully grasp the meanings of NESTs and NNESTs. This understanding is crucial for a more comprehensive view of the ELT landscape in Thailand and requires further investigation.

Methodology

Research Instruments

This research utilized a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative methodologies, specifically through administering a questionnaire and conducting group semi-structured interviews. A mixed-methodological approach helps develop a holistic picture by combining interpretations derived from the interviews with the prevalence of participants' perceptions gathered from surveys, which add depth and

breadth to the study (Wasti et al., 2022). The questionnaire, grounded in a thorough literature review, was segmented into three distinct parts. The initial section was designed to collect demographic data, such as gender, nationality, place of birth, previous high school program, current year of study at the university, minor subject, and current level of English proficiency.

The second section, designed to assess Thai students' understanding of 'NESTs' and 'NNESTs,' consisted of five questions. The first question required participants to state whether they had experience learning from NESTs, with 'Yes' and 'No' as response options. Those who answered 'Yes' were then asked to specify the countries of origin of their NESTs. Similarly, the third question inquired about their experience with NNESTs, followed by a request for those with such experience to identify their teachers' countries of origin. Accompanying these questions was a note allowing students to make assumptions about their teachers' origins if they were uncertain of the exact countries. These four questions aimed not only to illuminate students' perceptions of the terms NESs and NESTs but also to explore the ELT landscape in Thailand. The final question asked students to choose from a list of countries, identifying those they considered as NES countries, to assess whether Thai students can accurately identify countries from the traditionally recognized Inner Circle of English-speaking nations.

The third section of the questionnaire presented 21 items across three domains—expectations, understanding, and experiences—utilizing a four-point Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly agree' to 'Strongly disagree.' The interpretation of the mean scores was delineated according to statistical formulas as follows: a score between 3.26 and 4.00 denoted 'Strongly agree'; 2.51 to 3.25 indicated 'Agree'; 1.76 to 2.50 signified 'Disagree'; and 1.00 to 1.75 was interpreted as 'Strongly disagree' (Garcia, 2021). The scale did not contain a neutral response option, as findings from previous studies suggest that the presence of a neutral or non-response option increases the likelihood of participants choosing that option (Krosnick et al., 2002; John, 2005). The purpose of this section was to correlate the responses with those from the previous section, determining whether participants' expectations, understanding, and experiences aligned with their correct or incorrect answers. It also sought to investigate whether the preference for NESTs remains.

Group semi-structured interviews were also arranged, with at least five students per group voluntarily participating. These interviews featured ten principal questions that aligned with the questionnaire's content. Five pre-set questions targeting participants' understanding of NESs and NNESs, as well as their attitudes toward NESTs and NNESTs. The other five questions were created based on the quantitative results obtained from the questionnaires. This approach was employed to triangulate the data from the

quantitative segment. One group interview was separately conducted with each undergraduate student year group, from first to fourth year (i.e., four interviews total).

Before commencing data collection, the research protocol was submitted to and approved by a Human Research Ethics Committee. A pilot study was carried out, involving 28 undergraduate students majoring in English at a public university in Thailand. After responses were collected, SPSS was employed to investigate the internal consistency of the questionnaire items using Cronbach's alpha score. This analysis determined which items should be kept and which should be removed. According to Taber (2018), Cronbach's alpha values of 0.70 or higher indicate acceptable internal consistency. Items with alpha values below 0.70 were removed. The overall Cronbach's alpha score for the pilot questionnaire was .781. After removing some items, the alpha score of the adapted questionnaire increased to .854. The items were categorized based on the domains of expectations, understanding, and experiences, with each domain's score measured. The results are presented in Table 1 below, showing the number of items left for each domain and the Cronbach's alpha score after removing some items.

Table 1

Questionnaire: Cronbach's alpha score

Domain	Pilot questionnaire		Adapted questionnaire	
	Number of items	**Cronbach's alpha score**	**Number of items**	**Cronbach's alpha score**
Expectations	7	.664	5	.610
Understanding	12	.630	9	.697
Experiences	10	.614	7	.749
Total	**29**	**.781**	**21**	**.854**

Participants

The study aimed at on first-year to fourth-year undergraduate students majoring in English at a public university in Thailand. This selection was strategic, considering that these students, with their education largely based on English, were likely to have more exposure to foreign teachers compared to students in other majors. This demographic provided a clear basis for exploring how their educational background influences their understanding of the subject matter. All students were informed about the research project, and anonymity was ensured. Participation was voluntary, and students could freely refuse the invitation.

At this university, English major students are required to complete core courses encompassing the four skills of English, as well as courses in intercultural communication, literature, translation, and English language studies. From their second year onward, students may select one of five minors: English for Professions, Linguistics, Translation, Literature and Culture, or Chinese language. Courses such as Global Englishes and Sociolinguistics are part of the Linguistics minor.

The study population consisted of 454 students. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a sample size of 210 participants is sufficient for representing this population. At the conclusion of data collection, 279 English major students voluntarily participated in the study. Of these participants, 174 were female, 87 were male, and 18 did not specify their gender. All participants held Thai nationality and were born in Thailand. Regarding their educational background, 213 students attended a Thai program in their previous high schools, 23 students were part of bilingual programs, and 43 students were enrolled in English programs.

Regarding distribution by academic year, third-year students accounted for 30.47%, second-year students represented 24.73%, fourth-year students made up 24.01%, and first-year students constituted 20.79% of the total. Ninety-nine students selected English for Professions as their minor, followed by 67 choosing Translation, 27 choosing Chinese, 16 choosing Literature and Culture, and 12 choosing Linguistics. As only students from the second to the fourth year are eligible to select a minor, the 58 first-year participants did not identify a minor subject.

In terms of self-rated English proficiency, six students considered themselves fluent. Fifty-three students rated their English as excellent, while the majority (140 students) deemed their proficiency good. Another 80 students rated theirs as fair.

Data Collection and Analysis

Following the pilot study, primary data collection took place over one semester. The questionnaire was distributed using Google Forms, and participants were briefed on the study's purpose. Participation was strictly voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all participants before they commenced the questionnaire. The semi-structured group interviews were conducted on-site and audio-recorded. Throughout the interviews, the researchers frequently verified their understanding by restating the interviewees' answers and opinions to prevent misinterpretations and avoiding leading questions to prevent data manipulation. All interviews were transcribed and verified against the recordings by all researchers.

Questionnaire data were analyzed using SPSS to compute means and percentages. Some parts of the questionnaire, such as participants' selected countries, were transformed into plain text format (.txt), and freeware *AntConc* (Anthony, 2004) was used for frequency analysis. This program identified the frequency of country names listed by participants, streamlining result analysis. For qualitative data from the interviews, the researchers used inductive thematic analysis to identify emerging patterns and themes. This approach did not rely on theoretical constructs but instead evolved codes and themes from provisional topics (Charmaz, 2014; Lochmiller, 2021). During the review process, codes and themes were adjusted as new data emerged. To ensure accuracy, the researchers debriefed and validated the preliminary coding scheme and performed member checks with interview participants to confirm their views were accurately represented.

Results

Students' Self-Reported Perceptions of NES Countries

This section is based on the personal experiences of Thai undergraduate students to authentically capture their perspectives. Of the 279 participants, 256 reported prior experience studying under NESTs. These students were asked to identify their teachers' origins without being given a predefined list of countries. Out of these 256 students, 252 responded, while four did not.

Kachru's Inner Circle countries, widely accepted as NES countries, were used as benchmarks to identify NES countries. These countries include the UK, the USA, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada. An examination of the responses revealed that constituent countries of the UK—England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland—were included in the students' answers and classified as '*Correct.*' Answers listing countries outside this specified group were labeled as '*Incorrect.*'

The analysis showed that 55.5% of students provided correct responses, while 43.0% gave incorrect ones. A comprehensive analysis of the students' responses was subsequently conducted. One researcher initially translated responses written in Thai into English to ensure accuracy. This primarily involved one-word translations, such as from 'อังกฤษ' to 'England.' The translated words were manually reviewed by two other researchers before *AntConc*'s 'Word' function was used for frequency analysis. The data underwent a secondary review to ensure accuracy, particularly for countries with multi-word names such as New Zealand.

The results of the investigation, which aimed to identify the countries most commonly mentioned in students' submissions, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Ranking and Frequency of Countries Mentioned by Students

Rank	Answer	Freq.	Circle	Rank	Answer	Freq.	Circle
1	USA	140	Inner	12	Malaysia	2	Outer
2	Canada	81	Inner		New Zealand	2	Inner
3	Philippines	74	Outer		Russia	2	Expanding
4	UK	68	Inner		Wales	2	Inner
5	Switzerland	23	Expanding	13	Afghanistan	1	Expanding
6	British	14	Inner		Austria	1	Expanding
7	*Africa*	*13*	*Continent*		Belgium	1	Expanding
8	Australia	12	Inner		Brazil	1	Expanding
9	Ireland	5	Inner		France	1	Expanding
	South Africa	5	Outer		Ghana	1	Expanding
10	Indonesia	4	Expanding		Japan	1	Expanding
	Netherlands	4	Expanding		Kenya	1	Expanding
	Germany	4	Expanding		Nepal	1	Expanding
11	China	3	Expanding		Norway	1	Expanding
	England	3	Inner		Jamaica	1	Outer
	India	3	Outer		Nigeria	1	Outer
	Scotland	3	Expanding		*Caucasian*	*1*	*Ethnicity*
	Singapore	3	Outer		*Europe*	*1*	*Continent*
					White American	*1*	*Inner/Ethnic*

Table 2 reveals students' misunderstandings about NES countries, indicating a broader misconception related to regions and skin colors. The frequent misidentification of the Philippines, an Outer Circle country, as a NES country, and the inclusion of Switzerland, an Expanding Circle country, illustrate significant gaps in understanding. References to Africa, Caucasian, and Europe underscore this confusion, suggesting that students associate English proficiency with broader regions or races rather than specific NES countries. The table also reflects the varied backgrounds of ELT professionals in Thailand, which may contribute to these misunderstandings, as students have encountered a diverse range of teachers.

Despite some confusion regarding the countries of NESTs, 23 participants who studied with NNESTs provided correct responses about

NNES countries. The Philippines, mentioned 16 times, was ~~the~~ most frequently cited, underscoring the prevalence of Filipino teachers as the primary foreign teachers in Thailand. While Filipino teachers are commonly seen in classrooms, they are identified by some students as NESTs and by others as NNESTs. Germany was mentioned twice but was incorrectly referred to as a nationality rather than a country. Africa, cited twice, is a continent, not a country. These results are not overly significant, as students often confuse terms such as 'Germany' and 'German' or 'Africa' and 'African,' mistaking nationalities for countries. This suggests a simple misunderstanding related to geographical knowledge. Switzerland was also mentioned twice. Other countries, such as Russia, Turkey, Syria, and Sweden, were each mentioned once in the students' responses.

Students' Identified NES Countries from a Provided List

The students were also asked to select the countries they believed belonged to the NES group or the Inner Circle from a provided list, to cross-validate their awareness of NES countries. England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland were grouped as the UK on this list.

Among the 279 participants, only 30 (10.75%) identified all five countries correctly, while 139 (49.82%) gave partially correct responses. The most common response, chosen by 57 participants, included only two countries: the UK and the USA. This was followed by 24 participants selecting the UK, Australia, and the USA, and 18 participants choosing a combination of the UK, Australia, Canada, and the USA.

A substantial portion—39.42% of participants—provided incorrect responses. Notably, many of these answers included the UK and USA, along with additional NNES countries. Recurring incorrect combinations included groups such as Austria, the UK, Australia, the USA; Austria, the UK, New Zealand, Canada, the USA; and Austria, the UK, the USA, each selected by three students. Other combinations, such as Austria, the UK, Canada, the USA; the Philippines, Singapore, the UK, Australia, Canada, the USA; and Austria, the UK, New Zealand, the USA, were each chosen by two students.

Finally, the selected countries were compiled into a .txt file for frequency analysis using *AntConc*'s Word function. The top 20 most frequently mentioned countries are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Top 20 Countries Most Frequently Mentioned as NES Countries

Rank	Country	Freq.	Circle	Rank	Country	Freq.	Circle
1	UK	268	Inner	11	Finland	22	Expanding
2	USA	251	Inner	12	Denmark	16	Expanding
3	Australia	159	Inner	13	Belgium	15	Expanding
4	Canada	134	Inner	14	Sweden	14	Expanding
5	New Zealand	104	Inner	15	India	12	Outer
6	Austria	53	Expanding	16	Poland	11	Expanding
7	Singapore	44	Outer	17	Luxembourg	10	Expanding
8	Philippines	43	Outer	18	Germany	9	Expanding
9	Netherlands	32	Expanding	19	Nigeria	9	Outer
10	Iceland	24	Expanding	20	Burma	8	Expanding

Table 3 indicates Thai students' misunderstanding of the term 'NESs,' echoing the findings presented in the previous table, with frequent mentions of non-Inner Circle countries. This suggests a common error in categorizing European countries, typically from the Expanding Circle, as NES countries. As shown in the table, the USA ranks highest, reflecting the students' primary exposure to American teachers, while the strong preference for the UK indicates their awareness of it as a NES country. Furthermore, Table 3 reveals a deeper misunderstanding, as evidenced by the frequent incorrect classification of Expanding Circle countries, such as Austria, Finland, and Denmark, as NES countries. The inclusion of countries such as China, Japan, and Burma—known as non-English speaking—on both tables implies that students may consider English proficiency rather than actual NES status when evaluating these countries.

Students' Background and Their Understanding of NES

The analysis explores potential correlations between the students' backgrounds and their understanding of NESs. The findings from the Thai undergraduate students' experiences and awareness, as detailed earlier, are summarized in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4

Students' Academic Background and Their Understanding of NESTs based on Their Experience

Students' Academic Background		Correct (N=142)	Incorrect (N=110)
Previous high school's program	Thai program (N=213)	51.64%	38.50%
	Bilingual program (N=23)	39.13%	43.48%
	English program (N=43)	53.49%	41.86%
Current year of study at the faculty	1st year (N=58)	39.66%	44.83%
	2nd year (N=69)	33.33%	55.07%
	3rd year (N=85)	64.71%	29.41%
	4th year (N=67)	61.19%	31.34%
Minor subject at the faculty	English for professions (N=99)	52.53%	37.37%
	Linguistics (N=12)	75.00%	8.33%
	Translation (N=67)	52.24%	43.28%
	Literature and culture (N=16)	75.00%	18.75%
	Chinese (N=27)	40.74%	51.85%
	No minor subject (1st year students) (N=58)	39.66%	44.83%
Current English proficiency	Fluent (N=6)	0.00%	100.00%
	Excellent (N=53)	58.49%	39.62%
	Good (N=140)	50.71%	37.86%
	Fair (N=80)	50.00%	37.50%

Table 5

Students' Academic Background and Their Understanding of NESTs based on Their Awareness

Students' Academic Background		Correct (N=30)	Partially correct (N=139)	Incorrect (N=110)
Previous high school's program	Thai program (N=213)	12.68%	47.89%	39.44%
	Bilingual program (N=23)	4.35%	56.52%	39.13%
	English program (N=43)	4.65%	55.81%	39.53%
Current year of study at the faculty	1st year (N=58)	8.62%	56.90%	37.93%
	2nd year (N=69)	7.25%	50.72%	42.03%
	3rd year (N=85)	15.29%	38.82%	45.88%
	4th year (N=67)	10.45%	56.72%	29.85%
Minor subject at the faculty	English for Professions (N=99)	10.1%	55.56%	34.34%
	Linguistics (N=12)	25.0%	16.67%	58.33%
	Translation (N=67)	8.96%	47.76	43.28%

Students' Academic Background		Correct (N=30)	Partially correct (N=139)	Incorrect (N=110)
	Literature and culture (N=16)	18.75%	43.75%	37.5%
	Chinese (N=27)	11.11%	37.04%	51.85%
	No minor subject (1st year students) (N=58)	8.62%	56.9%	37.93%
Current English proficiency	Fluent (N=6)	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%
	Excellent (N=53)	18.87%	43.4%	37.74%
	Good (N=140)	10.0%	51.43%	38.57%
	Fair (N=80)	7.5%	51.25%	41.25%

The data in both tables indicate that education throughout the four years of study and the students' choice of minor subjects are key determinants in their understanding of NES countries and teachers. The 3rd- and 4th-year students showed higher accuracy in understanding NES countries and teachers, while 1st- and 2nd-year students demonstrated lower accuracy. Among the minor subjects, students minoring in Linguistics and Literature and Culture displayed a commendable grasp of the concept.

That said, the data does not provide a clear indication of whether students previously enrolled in Thai or English programs have a better understanding of NESs. At the same time, self-reported English proficiency appears to have a weak correlation with understanding NESs. It is important to note that these trends might be influenced by factors not covered in the data. Therefore, further research is essential to delve deeper into these aspects, which could reveal more about the interplay between language learning and cultural awareness.

Students' Expectation, Understanding, and Experiences with NESTs and NNESTs

In this section, the participants were requested to assess their expectations, understanding, and experiences. The results are illustrated in Tables 6, 7, and 8. The statements in these tables have been rearranged from the highest to the lowest rating for clarity.

Table 6

Students' Expectations toward NESTs and NNESTs

No	Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
1	I expect to learn English from teachers of any nationality, as long as they can effectively teach the language.	3.78	0.54	Strongly Agree
2	I expect to learn English with foreign teachers exclusively from native countries.	2.57	0.91	Agree
3	I have a stronger preference for teachers from native countries over non-native instructors.	2.45	0.87	Disagree
4	I expect to be taught English solely by white-skinned foreign teachers from native countries.	1.37	0.70	Strongly Disagree
5	I expect to study English with white-skinned foreign teachers regardless of their country of origin.	1.34	0.75	Strongly Disagree

Table 6 presents a clear consensus among participants regarding the acceptability of learning English from teachers of any nationality, provided they are effective. This consensus underscores a shift toward more inclusive attitudes in language education, valuing teacher competence over nationality. Notably, the participants strongly disagreed with the idea of being taught English exclusively by white-skinned teachers, whether from NES countries or other foreign nations. This disagreement aligns with a growing recognition of the importance of cultural inclusivity in language education, challenging stereotypes and biases in teacher selection.

Although the data reveal a moderate preference for teachers from NES countries, earlier results suggest that the students are uncertain about who actually qualifies as NESTs. Therefore, while it remains unclear which teacher's countries of origin are more preferred based on this table, the results clearly indicate an open attitude toward teachers of any nationality.

Table 7

Students' Understanding toward NESTs and NNESTs

No	Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
1	I understand that English belongs to everyone who speaks it.	3.34	0.83	Strongly agree
2	I understand that having a native English-speaking teacher in the institution enhances its reputation.	2.65	0.89	Agree

No	Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
3	I understand that individuals who are native English speakers, despite being born and raised in countries other than English-speaking ones, are still considered native speakers of English.	2.48	0.9	Disagree
4	I understand that only native English-speaking countries should have the authority to establish standards for the use of English.	2.31	0.92	Disagree
5	I understand that individuals of other nationalities, even if they were born and raised in an English-speaking country, may not be considered native speakers.	2.22	0.98	Disagree
6	I understand that all foreign English language teachers are native English speakers.	1.90	0.85	Disagree
7	I understand that native English speakers should be paid more than non-native speakers.	1.72	0.84	Strongly Disagree
8	I understand that English primarily belongs to native English-speaking countries.	1.61	0.78	Strongly Disagree
9	I understand that white foreign English teachers are native English speakers.	1.39	0.68	Strongly Disagree

Table 7 underscores the students' clear recognition of English as a global language. There is a strong consensus that English belongs to all speakers, which aligns with the results in Table 6. The students largely disagreed with various misconceptions. Nevertheless, they agreed that having NESTs enhances an institution's reputation. Consistent with previous findings, some students understood that NESTs can come from various nationalities.

Therefore, it can be concluded from this table that while the students embrace linguistic inclusivity, they still acknowledge the prestigious status of NESTs, who may be fluent English speakers from diverse countries.

Table 8

Students' Experiences Studying with NESTs and NNESTs

No	Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
1	I found that native English speakers are often more adept at incorporating cultural content into their teaching compared to non-native English speakers.	2.89	0.80	Agree
2	I found that teachers who are native English speakers are particularly effective in teaching speaking, listening, and writing skills.	2.87	0.81	Agree
3	I found that native English speakers tend to use English with greater clarity and a more widely accepted accent compared to non-native English speakers.	2.75	0.86	Agree
4	I found that grading by native English speakers tends to be more flexible compared to grading by non-native English speakers.	2.33	0.88	Disagree
5	I found that native English speakers generally exhibited stronger teaching skills compared to non-native English speakers.	2.12	0.89	Disagree
6	I found that native English teachers were more thorough and prepared in terms of exam preparation compared to non-native English teachers.	1.99	0.82	Disagree
7	I found that native English speakers tend to make the process of learning English more engaging and enjoyable compared to non-native English speakers.	1.90	0.77	Disagree

Contrary to the strong agreements and disagreements observed in the previous tables, the mean scores in this table fall within the 'agree' to 'disagree' range, indicating only moderate levels of sentiment.

The students tended to agree on certain strengths of NESTs over NNESTs, as reflected in the similar mean scores. These perceived strengths include being more adept at integrating cultural content into teaching and being more effective in teaching speaking, listening, and writing skills. NESTs are also viewed as using English with greater clarity and a more universally accepted accent compared to NNESTs.

At the same time, the students generally disagreed that NESTs are superior to NNESTs in various teaching-related aspects. They refuted the idea that NESTs are more flexible in grading, exhibit stronger teaching skills,

are more thorough in exam preparation, or make learning English more engaging than NNESTs.

Despite the students' confusion about the countries of NESTs, this counterargument reveals a nuanced perspective. The students acknowledge positive aspects of NESTs but refrain from endorsing the notion of complete dominance.

Results from Interviews

There was a variety of opinions among the students from the 1st to the 4th year, but the discussions became noticeably more in-depth starting with the 2nd-year students. The interviews revealed clearly emerging patterns.

Defining NESs through proficiency, accent, environment, and culture

The participants collectively agreed that proficiency in English is fundamental to being recognized as a NES, indicating that NES status transcends geographical origins. This perspective was illustrated by a 4th-year student, who suggested that even someone from a formerly colonized country like Burma could be considered a NES if they are fluent in English. The student's viewpoint is evident in the excerpt:

> In my opinion, being a NES doesn't necessarily mean being only American or British. For instance, if someone is from a country that was colonized, like Burma, and they are fluent in English, then they can be regarded as NES.

Accents were also deemed significant in this context. The majority of students associated British and American accents with the standard English of NESs. One 4th-year student characterized NESs as individuals speaking standard English without a distinct accent. In contrast, 1st-year students showed a preference for NESTs and their 'smoother' accents. Interestingly, a 2nd-year student suggested that Australians might not be universally recognized as NESs due to unique influences on their accent. These views demonstrate a bias toward accents previously encountered, despite the students' willingness to learn with diverse teachers. One student mentioned:

> I am okay with studying with NNESTs, but learning with them will not help me learn a standard accent. I used to study with a Filipino and picked up a Filipino accent. Personally, I prefer native accents.

The environment was acknowledged as another determinant of NES status. The consensus among the students was that being raised in an English-speaking environment and using English as the primary home language were qualifying factors for NESs.

In addition, cultural understanding was identified as a key element. Most students opined that a profound immersion in English culture, especially grasping its humor, is vital for NES classification. A 2nd-year student succinctly expressed this view:

> NESs understand the language so thoroughly that they grasp its humor. It can be difficult for NNESs to fully understand the language without an intimate knowledge of its origins and culture.

These findings suggest that the students value a comprehensive and culturally nuanced command of English, reflecting a complex and evolving understanding of what constitutes a native speaker in the global context of English language education.

Understanding of NES and NNES countries

The interview phase reinforced the findings of the questionnaire, revealing that the students often misconstrued the concept of NES countries, frequently mistaking NNES countries for NES ones. This confusion was particularly common among the 1st-year students, who erroneously included countries such as Indonesia, Singapore, and Iceland. This trend appears to stem from the previously discussed notion that the students define NESs based on proficiency, accent, environment, and culture.

Moreover, while some students accurately identified NES countries, they often overlooked others. For example, two 1st-year students identified "only the US, the UK, and Australia" as NES countries. In contrast, another 1st-year student considered "only the US and the UK" as the primary NES countries. This pattern of partial recognition persisted among the 2nd-year students, with one citing "only the UK and US", another including "the UK, the US, and Canada", and yet another listing "the US, Canada, and the UK". A 3rd-year student also erred by stating that "Only four countries, the UK, the US, Australia, and Canada are NES".

Notably, the 4th-year students in the group interview did not exhibit these misconceptions, underscoring their broader academic understanding within their English major.

The interviews emphasized a pronounced awareness of two countries in particular: the US and the UK were consistently recognized as NES countries, as evidenced in the aforementioned excerpts.

NESTs and NNESTs

As the students advance through their academic years, their perspectives on NESTs and NNESTs evolve from initial mixed preferences to a more sophisticated understanding.

In the first year, the students show a slight preference for NESTs over NNESTs, favoring NESTs for their native accent and cultural context. One student explicitly explained, "I'd choose NESTs for their insight into the language's culture and accent."

By the second year, there is a noticeable shift toward valuing NNESTs for their comprehensive language knowledge and priority on grammar, as illustrated by a student's comment, "NESTs may not study English as in-depth as NNESTs, who focus more on grammar and require more qualifications."

The 3rd-year students begin to prioritize teaching methods over native status, appreciating NESTs for their cultural insights and NNESTs for their systematic teaching. One student reflected on learning from both Filipino and American teachers:

> I had the experience of studying simultaneously with Filipino and American teachers. While their teaching content and methods varied, the knowledge gained was comparable. Also, both brought in elements of their respective cultures into the lessons.

By the fourth year, the students recognize the strengths of both NESTs and NNESTs and advocate for aligning teaching skills with subject needs. A student commented, "Whether NESTs or NNESTs, it's important to assess who is best suited for teaching what. Native status shouldn't dictate teaching ability."

Overall, the students at all levels value the quality and effectiveness of teaching over the teacher's native status. They prefer a comprehensive education that incorporates a variety of perspectives and teaching styles, orienting toward the content and quality of education rather than the teacher's origin.

Impact of Education on the Knowledge of English as a Global Language

In line with the previous discussions, the interviews across various academic years clearly revealed how education influences the students' understanding of English as a global language. Notably, misconceptions about NESs are most common among the 1st-year students, and their understanding remains limited. In contrast, the 4th-year students engage in deeper discussions, often referencing concepts like the "inner circle" or citing linguists such as David Crystal. This is evident in these two representative excerpts:

> NESs are those in the inner circle, where English is their mother tongue. However, it's not just about nationality or region. To me, anyone who uses English as their first language belongs to this group. Being in the inner circle doesn't equate to uniform proficiency or guarantee anything.

> Listening to David Crystal, I realized that English isn't just British or American. It's diverse in listening, reading, and writing. I don't want to limit it to British Americans or make children averse to studying with Filipinos.

In addition to misconceptions about NES countries, the 1st-year students, not yet exposed to a broad range of subjects, often exhibit a more limited perspective. For example, one student believed, "No matter how fluent NNESs are, they will never be considered NESs." Furthermore, most 1st-year students believe that individuals with NES nationalities, even if born and raised in NNES countries, are still considered NES.

The 2nd-year students begin to adopt a more flexible worldview regarding language, recognizing its evolving nature. One 2nd-year student observed:

> NESs are those fluent in English because they grew up in an English-speaking country. I talked to a Thai friend who moved to America as a child. He was very fluent in English but struggled with Thai, effectively becoming a native English speaker.

Both 3rd- and 4th-year students emphasized the positive influence of their English major education on their knowledge and perspectives. Two 3rd-year students shared their insights, with one stating, "The education shifted

our worldview, making us less judgmental," and another noting, "We have gained broader insights and perspectives."

Some particular courses were mentioned for their profound impact. A 3rd-year student recounted, "Initially, our view of language was limited. However, the '*World Englishes*' course broadened our understanding of culture and language. We explored beyond mere language to the associated cultures." A 4th-year student echoed this sentiment, saying, "The '*Intercultural Communication*' course offered me a new worldview."

These findings illustrate the transformative role of higher education in evolving the students' perceptions of English within a global context, transitioning from a narrow view to a broader, more informed perspective. Despite this, these results are specific to students majoring in English. Future research should include non-English majors to determine if similar patterns emerge.

Discussion and Implications

Based on the findings using Kachru's three concentric circles as a benchmark, the study reveals significant confusion among students about the definition of NESs. This is evidenced by 43.0% providing incorrect responses and 39.42% choosing incorrect countries when presented with the list of countries. Likewise, 49.82% selected only partially correct countries. Predominantly, the UK and the USA are viewed as primary sources of NESTs, consistent with Namphandung et al. (2021), who found that Thai students commonly regard British or American English as the standard. Conversely, the students also identified countries from Kachru's outer and expanding circles, challenging the validity of his three concentric circles concept. This points to the importance of understanding students' perceptions of NESs and NESTs before conducting further research.

The study examined English major students, who frequently interact with foreigners and take courses like *World Englishes, Global Englishes,* and *Intercultural Communication*. Their education might enable some students to identify countries within the Inner Circle, as these courses contribute to a greater understanding of World and Global Englishes. Even so, understanding non-English majors' comprehension of the term NES is equally vital, as it is widely used outside academia. If their understanding mirrors that of English majors, future research should aim to redefine NES to reduce confusion, bias toward teachers of different nationalities, and discrimination in hiring practices. Courses typically reserved for English majors, such as *World Englishes and Global Englishes*, should be considered for integration into non-English major curricula. The researchers also encourage

educators across disciplines to recognize the evolving status of English and to play a critical role in imparting broader knowledge to their students.

The belief among many Thai students in this study that almost all non-Thai teachers are NESTs might be influenced by the diverse origins of ELT professionals in Thailand, who predominantly come from various parts of the world, including the Philippines. This perspective could also be shaped by their education as English majors, as noted in the interview section. As students progress to higher academic levels, they tend to value less the teachers' origins and more their teaching methods and expertise.

This finding, which underscores the students' embrace of the cultural diversity of teachers, aligns with prior studies by Tangkawanit (2014), Crank (2015), Boonsuk (2016), and Boonsuk and Ambele (2020). The results may also be influenced by other factors, such as exposure to English outside the classroom or the increasing maturity of the students, which future studies could explore further.

Despite this, the findings from the Likert scale section of the questionnaire showed a moderate preference for NESTs, echoing earlier research (e.g., Boonsuk, 2016; Thongcharoen, 2017; Wechkrajang, 2020; Waelateh et al., 2019). The students agreed that having NESTs enhances an institution's reputation. Yet, the initial part of this study revealed the students' confusion about the term NES, suggesting that NESTs primarily refer to individuals from the US and the UK, as these countries are consistently mentioned in relation to NESTs. The inclusion of various nationalities as NESTs, and interview results indicating that people from Burma can be NESTs based on their English proficiency, imply that this preference may extend to any non-Thai individuals fluent in English and immersed in English culture, provided they possess teaching expertise that earns them respect as NESTs.

Creating an environment of diversity and inclusion is indeed beneficial. The students' agreement that having NESTs enhances an institution's reputation aligns with the current global context. Such exposure allows students to engage with a variety of cultures, broadening their perspectives and understanding of the world. Regardless, some students still exhibit biases, perceiving individuals with a "standard accent" as NESTs. This bias likely stems from class exposure, as indicated by the frequent mention of teachers with the US nationality in the findings of Table 2, or from media influences, where the US and the UK dominate representations of English speakers. Educational materials that predominantly feature these countries as the primary standards may also contribute to this bias. Addressing this issue through education is essential to mitigate such biases.

Biases toward English varieties are deeply entrenched, exemplified by the British preference for their own version of English over American

English, as noted by Jenkins (2014). Thailand's educational landscape, with its combination of NESTs and NNESTs, presents an opportunity to overcome traditional divides in English usage. Further investigation into Thai people's understanding of NES and NESTs could help shift these biases, fostering a more inclusive outlook and leading to equitable recruitment practices.

In the Thai context, an attempt to avoid confusion surrounding the terms NESTs and NNESTs has introduced the term *Local English Teachers (LETs)*, as discussed in Wechkrajang (2020). This might be a viable alternative. For future research, it would be beneficial to clearly define the terms NESTs and NNESTs, specifying exactly who is included in these categories, and to educate participants before further investigating their perceptions.

Conclusion

This study has comprehensively examined the understanding of NES and NESTs among Thai English-major undergraduates, revealing complex perceptions influenced by their interactions with diverse ELT professionals. The primary aim was to clarify the students' interpretations of NES and NESTs. The findings revealed that the students identified various countries as NES countries, alongside the commonly recognized NES countries such as the US and the UK. There is a clear link between the students' education over their four years of study and their understanding of these terms, leading to a broader perspective on English.

The results also showed that the students recognize individuals as NESTs based on their teaching skills, expertise, and the quality of education, rather than the teacher's origin. This perspective should be embraced to promote diversity and inclusion. We also support the students' view that the distinction between NESTs and NNESTs in teaching specific subjects should be eliminated, advocating instead for valuing each teacher's individual expertise, irrespective of nationality.

Previous discussions demonstrate the need for further research into participants' understanding of the terms NES and NESTs. Comparative studies with non-English major students are essential to determine whether similar patterns of understanding exist. Besides, examining the influence of different teaching methods and materials on students' perceptions could provide critical insights for improving language education strategies.

A comparative analysis with students from NES countries could also yield valuable findings. This might involve exploring their perceptions of English as a global language, their understanding of NESTs and NNESTs, and their attitudes toward different English accents. Such research could

illuminate the global dynamics of English language learning and teaching, particularly how cultural and educational backgrounds shape language perceptions.

Expanding the current research to include diverse groups, such as Human Resource professionals, school administrators, and parents, could provide a broader perspective, as these stakeholders are directly involved in the education process.

In conclusion, this study opens multiple avenues for future research, offering the potential to enhance our understanding of the global dynamics of English language education in Thailand and other similar contexts.

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