

# ความคิดเห็นของนักศึกษาที่มีต่ออาจารย์คนไทย ผู้สอนในหลักสูตรนานาชาติ ในมหาวิทยาลัยแห่งหนึ่งของรัฐ

## Students' Perceptions of Thai Teachers in an International Program at a Public Thai University

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### บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มุ่งศึกษาความคิดเห็นของนักศึกษาที่มีต่ออาจารย์คนไทยผู้สอนในหลักสูตรนานาชาติ ณ มหาวิทยาลัยของรัฐแห่งหนึ่งในประเทศไทย งานวิจัยนี้ใช้วิธีวิจัยทั้งเชิงคุณภาพและเชิงปริมาณ เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการเก็บข้อมูล ประกอบด้วย แบบสัมภาษณ์กลุ่ม (Focus Group Interview) และแบบสอบถาม (Questionnaire) ในการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลจากการสัมภาษณ์ใช้หลักทฤษฎี Open and Axial Coding Techniques (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) และใช้โปรแกรม SPSS วิเคราะห์ข้อมูลจากแบบสอบถามเพื่อหาค่าสถิติพรรณนา อาทิเช่น ค่าเปอร์เซ็นต์ ประชากรที่เข้าร่วมวิจัยครั้งนี้ คือ นักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 2 จำนวน 32 คน และนักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 3 จำนวน 20 คน จากหลักสูตรนานาชาติ

ผลการวิจัยแสดงให้เห็นว่าผู้เข้าร่วมวิจัยส่วนใหญ่ชอบให้อาจารย์ชาวต่างชาติที่เป็นเจ้าของภาษาอังกฤษ (Native English Speaker Teachers) สอนในหลักสูตรนานาชาติมากกว่าอาจารย์คนไทย อย่างไรก็ตาม แม้ผู้เข้าร่วมวิจัยได้คาดหวังว่าหลักสูตรนานาชาติต้องมีอาจารย์ผู้สอนเฉพาะที่เป็นเจ้าของภาษาเท่านั้น แต่นักศึกษาบางส่วนยังต้องการให้มีทั้งอาจารย์คนไทยและอาจารย์ต่างชาติสอนร่วมกันในหลักสูตร เพราะนักศึกษารับรู้ได้ว่าทั้งอาจารย์คนไทยและอาจารย์ชาวต่างชาติเป็นประโยชน์ต่อหลักสูตร ดังนั้นอาจารย์ผู้สอนควรมีบทบาทในการสอนรายวิชาที่ตนเองมีความเชี่ยวชาญตามความรู้และความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษของตนเอง

**คำสำคัญ:** อาจารย์ชาวต่างชาติที่เป็นเจ้าของภาษาอังกฤษ, อาจารย์ที่ไม่ใช่เจ้าของภาษาอังกฤษ, อาจารย์คนไทย, ความคิดเห็นของนักศึกษา, หลักสูตรนานาชาติ

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## Abstract

This study aims to investigate students' perceptions of Thai teachers in an international program at a public Thai university. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The data were collected by means of focus group interviews and a questionnaire. Transcriptions of the focus group interviews were analyzed by using open and axial coding techniques (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The questionnaire data were analyzed by the SPSS Software Program for simple descriptive statistics such as percentage. The participants were 32 second-year and 20 third-year undergraduates from an international program. The findings indicated that overall the majority of the participating students preferred to have native English speaker teachers (NESTs) to teach them in the international program rather than Thai teachers. However, with the expectation for the international program to have only NESTs, a lot of students still preferred the program to have both NESTs and Thai teachers working cooperatively. They perceived that both Thai teachers and NESTs benefitted the program. These teachers should have a role in teaching the subjects in the field of their expertise according to their knowledge, language competence, and abilities. Findings are described in details and supported with some evidence.

**Keywords:** Native English Speaker Teachers, Non-native English Speaker Teachers, Thai Teachers, Students' Perceptions, International Program



## Introduction

In Thailand, English is an important language especially in business and education, and it is a compulsory subject taught as a foreign language from kindergarten to tertiary level. With its importance and popularity, international programs have increased up to 981 programs in 2010, of which 225 programs are for doctoral degrees; 389 programs are for master's degrees; 342 programs are for bachelor's degrees; and 25 programs are for other degrees (Study in Thailand 2010, Office of the Higher Education Commission, Ministry of Education of Thailand).

With the growth of international programs, many educational institutions in Thailand need both native English speaker teachers (NESTs) and Thai teachers to teach in the international programs, because in Thailand, there are not as many well-qualified NESTs as all the international programs could hire. However, it is generally acceptable that NESTs and non-NESTs are different in terms of their English language competence. Apparently, students prefer to study English with NESTs rather than non-NESTs (Chen, 2008; Phothongsunan and Suwanarak, 2008). One of the common reasons is that they would like to acquire language from NESTs. They can acquire the NEST's accent and experience real language uses. Several Thai students generally perceive that non-NESTs do not have native-like accents and that is regarded as a poor accent. Research evidence has shown that accents of non-NESTs are considered by foreign language

learners to be unqualified, unprofessional, and less effective when compared to the favorable accents of native English speaker teachers. For example, Braine (2010) summarized Jenkins' (2005) work whose results indicated the participants' view of the native accent as "Good", "Perfect", "Correct", "Proficient", "Competent", "Fluent", "Real", and "Original English", but those of non-native speakers as "Not Good", "Wrong", "Incorrect", "Not Real", "Fake", "Deficient", and "Strong" (p. 16-17). Therefore, accents affect students' perceptions of teachers' language ability and students generally want to study with NESTs because they want to achieve native-like accent and competence.

Not only that, some previous literature showed that most of the students preferred to study English with NESTs and some did not want to study English with non-NESTs. For example, Lasagabaster and Sierra (2002) remarked that students at every educational level preferred to be taught by NESTs. Maum (2002) noted that "some NNESTs have reported that many of their students resented being taught by a non-native speaker until they were able to prove that they could be as effective as a native English speaking teacher" (p. 1). Similarly, Thai teachers face difficulties in using English language as a medium of their instructions and that affects the students' perceptions on the quality of English language teaching. This leads to a low standard of Thai students' learning achievement in English language learning (Punthumasen, 2007). Therefore, students prefer to study with NESTs more than non-NESTs (Lasagabaster and Sierra, 2002; Phoongsunanan and Suwanarak, 2008; Meadows and Muramatsu, 2007). Due to the students' preferences, NESTs without teaching qualifications tend to be hired instead of qualified and experienced non-NESTs in teaching English in ESL and EFL contexts (Maum, 2002; Braine, 2010). However, research indicate that non-NESTs also have their own positive aspects. Non-NESTs are found to be good in empathy and sensitivity to students' needs and language difficulties; share the similar linguistic and cultural background; experience comparatively similar prior English language learning; and better encourage student's language learning (Árva and Medgyes, 2000; Maum, 2002; Braine, 2010).

Medgyes (1994) noted that NESTs and non-NESTs are two different species and they are different in terms of language proficiency and teaching behavior. Their different teaching behaviors are most found in their discrepancy in language proficiency, and they are equally good in their own terms. Medgyes (2001) remarked that non-NESTs can be good English teachers especially those who are effective in teaching language learning strategies, emphatic and sensitive to students' needs and language difficulties. They also could provide more information of language learning and share the same mother tongue language of the students. Even though research indicated that non-NESTs could be good teachers, many of the students still view their non-NESTs as weak in language competence. Árva and Medgyes (2000), for example, noted that NESTs are better than non-NESTs in their language competence and could answer questions immediately. On the other hand, non-NESTs have lower level of command of English and struggled in answering questions.

So far, with these differences of NESTs and non-NESTs, research evidence indicates that having native and non-native English speaker teachers affects students' perceptions of their learning to some extent. This study, therefore, aims to investigate students' perceptions of Thai teachers who teach in an international program in the Thai context.



## Research Methodology

### 1. Participants

The participants were 52 (13 males, 39 females) Thai undergraduates from an international program at a public Thai university. There were 32 second-year, and 20 third-year undergraduates. Their ages ranged from 18 to 26 years. Most of them graduated from public high schools. In this international program, all of the students were taught by both native English speaker teachers (NESTs) and Thai teachers by using English as a medium of instruction. The students enrolled to study in the international program with the hope that they could develop their language proficiency, experience the real use of English language from native English speaker teachers, and have better opportunities to find a good job in the future.

### 2. Research Instruments

The research instruments were focus group interviews and a questionnaire. Ten interview questions, which had been developed based on the questions in the questionnaire, were used to elicit students' perceptions of Thai teachers who teach in the international program. Each focus group interview lasted about 40–60 minutes.

The questionnaire which had been adapted from Cheung and Braine (2007) and Lasagabaster and Sierra (2002) consisted of three parts. The first part captured the demographic data of the participants. The second part focused on the participants' experience of English language learning with Thai teachers. The last part comprised of questions on students' opinions of Thai teachers including the students' preference of teachers, communication between teachers and students and the teaching of Thai teachers (grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading, writing, motivating, and language learning strategies). The items in the questionnaire were responded to by using a five-point Likert Scale. It consisted of strongly agree (5), agree (4), undecided (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1).

### 3. Data Analysis

The researcher employed open and axial coding techniques (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to analyze the data from the focus group interviews. The open coding technique was used to identify and categorize the phenomena found in the interview texts in order to form the similarity and difference categories. Then axial coding technique was used to put the data found in the first stage into groups or dimensions according to their relationship in order to explain and answer the research question.

Data from the questionnaires were analyzed by using the SPSS Software Program to calculate descriptive statistics values such as percentage. The percentage was used to identify the proportion of scores for the questionnaire.



## Results

### 1. Students' Perceptions of Thai Teachers

The participants of the study, who were all Thais, were found to perceive both positive and negative aspects of having Thai teachers teaching in the international program. Yet, they agree that there should be Thai teachers in the program.

#### 1.1 Thai teachers benefitted the international program to a certain extent

**Table 1** Students' preference of teachers

No.	Statements	Percentage				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	I prefer Thai non-native English speaker teachers as my teachers.	3.85	5.77	42.31	34.62	13.46
2	I prefer native English speaker teachers as my teachers.	1.92	1.92	30.77	32.69	32.69
3	If I could choose, I would prefer to have both native English speaker teachers and Thai non-native English speaker teachers to teach me.	3.85	5.77	21.15	36.54	32.69

**Note:** 1 = strongly disagreed, 2 = disagreed, 3 = undecided, 4 = agreed, 5 = strongly agreed

Table 1 show that most of the student participants (65.38%) preferred to study with native English speaker teachers over Thai non-native English speaker teachers. However, when asking them to choose their teachers, majority of the participating students (69.23%) preferred to have both NESTs and Thai teachers to teach in the international program, most of them preferred to have more NESTs in the program. This was because they believed that studying with NESTs could develop their communication skills particularly listening and speaking skills. The students also could acquire English native speakers' accents and learn more about their culture and life styles because the NESTs had the knowledge of the target language and they could use English more fluently and accurately with good pronunciation. Despite the preference of the NESTs, the participants also showed positive attitudes toward Thai teachers taking part in the international program. The students perceived that Thai teachers understood and were sensitive to their needs. For example, the finding showed that Thai teachers knew how the

students learned English, how much experience they had in learning English, and they understood why the students learned English. Therefore, Thai teachers could better employ strategies and techniques to help students learn the language. In addition, Thai teachers understood students well especially their non-verbal communication in classroom. In their teaching, when the students just kept quiet and said nothing after a lecture or an explanation had just been provided, Thai teachers would assume that the students did not understand the lesson. Therefore, they would provide more explanations and try to make the students understand the lesson. According to the participants, the NESTs interpreted students' silence as students' understanding and no questions. As the participating students' maintained, their silence mean having questions, but they did not know how to ask, or they were afraid that they might use wrong English in the questions.

In addition, Thai teachers were always helpful with the students' homework. They were kind, concerned and followed up with the students' assignments until the students submitted them. Thus, with such attention, Thai teachers seemed to have high expectation on the students' language ability. They assumed that students understood everything they said in the classroom. In reality, the students perceived that they could not reach Thai teachers' expectation for them especially in terms of their English language proficiency since they had just graduated from high schools. They needed time to adjust their basic knowledge of English, and using English was their new experience.

### **1.2 Thai teachers were approachable because they shared mother tongue with the students**

In terms of communication between Thai teachers and students, most of the students approached Thai teachers more than NESTs. The students sometimes preferred to use Thai language to talk with their teachers, ask questions, consult about homework, and ask for suggestions both inside and outside class. The findings showed that by using Thai language, the students can interact with Thai teachers more effectively, understood the lesson better, and got more in-depth information. This could solve students' difficulties in learning. Also, Thai teachers can use Thai language to translate and explain some difficult points to make the students understand the lesson. However, when using English with Thai teachers, the participating students found themselves unconfident and even failed to communicate with Thai teachers. They perceived that Thai teachers were very strict on grammar accuracy, and when they speak with grammatically incorrect English, their Thai teachers hardly accepted that.

### **1.3 Thai teachers used particular teaching methods and treated students differently from NESTs**

Regarding teachers' knowledge on teaching methods and understanding students, results of this study demonstrated that Thai teachers were perceived to prepare the lessons well, have clear teaching goals, and prepare relevant materials of the subject to teach in the actual context. However, Thai teachers were found to rely on textbooks and adhered to conventional teaching styles. The teachers sat in the front of the class, opened the book and read the contents



in the books to the students. They sometimes summarized the long contents for the students. In addition, Thai teachers sometimes strongly emphasized academic matters. Therefore, the participants suggested the teachers should make their teaching interesting and fun, and avoided making the teaching boring, so that the students would pay more attention to study and enjoy learning. Even though Thai teachers teaching styles demotivated students, they seemed to provide students more resources for information and tried every way to make students understand the lesson. The participants also perceived that Thai teachers assigned homework as part of the teaching and learning processes, but some homework were difficult and not related to the lessons. They had to search for new information. Therefore, the students did not have adequate time to do the homework. The findings suggested that teachers should plan and look at students' readiness before giving them homework. In addition, the participating students also perceived that Thai teachers were strict. They always checked students' class attendance and included class attendance as a part of the evaluation of students' performance.

#### **1.4 Thai teachers were keen on teaching some specific English skills**

The qualitative data showed that Thai teachers would be able to teach grammar, writing, and tourism and hotel management more effectively. Most of the participants revealed that Thai teachers had better knowledge of grammar and writing. Also, grammar was difficult, and complicated. If Thai teachers taught grammar, the students could ask Thai teachers in Thai language and Thai teachers could also use Thai language to explain grammar points which would make the students better understand them. On the other hand, studying grammar with native English speaker teachers was difficult to understand and hard to follow the teachers.

In teaching writing, Thai teachers were concerned more with grammar and rarely checked the main ideas. They also tried to look at how much the students can write and check their language accuracy. They also corrected the students' mistakes or incorrect items in their writing so that the students could revise by themselves. These made the students know their own writing skill and how to improve their writing. Furthermore, Thai teachers also knew about students' knowledge of writing skills and their writing level, so they could better know how to teach and provide ways to improve students' writing skills.

In terms of teaching tourism and hotel management, the participants would prefer to study with Thai teachers. This was because some Thai teachers had experienced working in a hotel and used to be a tour guide before. Therefore, they would be better to teach and provide students good experience and techniques for students' future works in these areas.

However, Thai teachers were perceived to have less knowledge of the culture of English-speaking countries. Therefore, NESTs would be better to teach culture that bound with the English language to the students. For example, NESTs would know better in terms of appropriateness of language use and the politeness and impoliteness of the English language. On the other hand, Thai teachers could be effective to teach culture in terms of how to react to native English speakers' culture because they might have learnt and experienced native's culture

before. In addition, the students would prefer Thai teachers to teach Thai culture and native English speaker teachers to teach their native culture.

### **1.5 Thai teachers' accent diverted from that of native English speaker teachers and caused some difficulties in students' learning**

The participating students revealed that studying English with Thai teachers meant that they could only get a Thai accent. A Thai English accent resulted in problems when communicating with competent NESTs. The problem was that the same sentence learnt from Thai teachers was not understood when spoken by the NESTs. Also, the students struggled when they communicated with native English speakers in real situations. Therefore, the students preferred to study with native English speaker teachers in order to acquire and achieve native-like accents. However, the students could better accept to study with Thai teachers who had been in English-speaking countries long enough to have the accent of the native speakers.



## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate students' perceptions of Thai teachers in the international program. The findings indicated the students' perceptions of preference of native English speaker teachers (NESTs) and the benefits of having Thai teachers in the international program in terms of how much they shared some experience with the students such as their native language, their experience of English language learning, and their understanding of students. In addition, the results revealed the students' perceptions of Thai teachers' teaching methods and how they treated the students. Moreover, teachers' knowledge of and practical experience on subject matter, as well as knowledge of English grammar was perceived as beneficial to teach Thai students in the international program. Despite positive perception, Thai teachers' pronunciation and accent of English were perceived as negative since the students in the international program expected to learn how to adopt accent and pronunciation of English from native English speaker teachers.

Regarding the finding on students' preference of teachers, the majority of the participating students (69.23%) preferred to have both Thai teachers and NESTs to teach in the international program, and most of the participating students (65.38%) preferred to have NESTs to be their teachers over non-native English teachers. This finding was also noted in other studies of students' perceptions of native and non-native English teachers (Avasadanond, 2002; Lasagabaster and Sierra, 2002; Maum, 2002; Meadows and Muramatsu, 2007; Phothongsunan and Suwanarak, 2008). The research pointed out that because NESTs had a superior command of the English language, they could be considered more effective English teachers. Learning with NESTs could help students develop their communication skills in terms of listening and speaking skills, acquire the native's accent, and know more about the native's culture and lifestyle. This would be considered as the strength of language teaching by NESTs.



Yet, the students had positive attitudes toward Thai teachers. This finding was similar to that in the study by Watson Todd and Pojanapunya (2009). Thai teachers were perceived to be helpful to the students, understand the students' learning process, sensitive to their language learning, and were always concerned for their students.

In terms of the benefits of having Thai teachers in the international program, Thai teachers were perceived to prepare their lessons well with clear learning objectives and relevant learning materials for their students. Even though findings showed that Thai teachers adhered with traditional teaching styles and based their teaching on textbooks, Thai teachers were perceived as beneficial to teach writing and grammar. Similar findings that non-native English teachers should teach grammar and writing also were found in the studies of Chen (2008), Grubbs *et al.*, (2010), and Phothongsunan and Suwanarak (2008). With the commonality, both Thai teachers and students share the same native Thai language. The students were willing to use Thai language as a tool to talk, ask questions, consult and ask for suggestions from Thai teachers. By doing this, the students perceived that it made them understand the subject matter better, reduce language learning difficulties, enhance familiarity between the students and Thai teachers, and fulfill the learning requirement. Sharing the same native Thai language, however, made the students avoid using English because they were also afraid to speak incorrect English grammar which was unacceptable by Thai teachers. Findings similar to this of non-native English teachers who shared the same native language with their students could be found in other previous studies (Reves and Medgyes, 1994; Medgyes, 2001; Braine, 2010; Ma, 2012).

Due to the fact that Thai teachers shared the same English language learning experience in Thai educational system as their students, they were perceived to know better about their students' learning processes, and language proficiency levels of their students, so that they could provide ways and learning strategies to help students learn better. These findings are also in agreement with the results of another study by Phothongsunan and Suwanarak (2008).

Yet, being a Thai teacher was perceived as unsupportive to students' improvement of English language skills. Enrolling to study in the international program, Thai students expected to learn to how to adopt accent and pronunciation of English from native English speaker teachers. The students' perceptions on teachers' command of English particularly focusing on pronunciation and accent, and fluency influenced how they consider the quality of education. The participating students perceived that compared to NESTs, Thai teachers were not fluent and accurate in their use the English language. This would be considered the weakness of lack of English proficiency of non-native English speaker teachers (Ma, 2012). Thai teachers were, consequently, perceived not appropriate to teach pronunciation, listening and speaking, native's culture, phonetics, linguistics, vocabulary and everyday English use in communication. Learning with Thai teachers and acquiring Thai teachers' English accents, the students perceived that that made them have communication problems with competent NESTs in actual situations. This was because the accents of competent NESTs and Thai teachers were different and that made the students unfamiliar with the accents of NESTs.



## Conclusion

Even though most of the participating students expressed their preferences of NESTs over Thai teachers in the international program in the context of the study, Thai teachers were perceived as beneficial to them. Both NESTs and Thai teachers were perceived to mutually make contributions to the international program. The quality of the program was suggested to be managed by putting the right teaching staffs to their expertise. That is, the teaching assignments of teachers should be managed according to the knowledge (i.e. English language proficiency, experience abroad, knowledge of culture of Thai and English language, subject matter), experience (i.e. having relevant practical experience in addition to knowledge in the particular fields of study), as well as pedagogical strengths (i.e. understanding students' learning process and learning difficulties, being sensitive and empathic to students) of the teaching staffs. As Meadows and Muramatsu (2007) noted in their study's conclusion, language program administrators should have various academic staff provided to students to study with a balancing of native speaker and non-native speaker instructors.



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