



Learners' Attitudes towards Native and Non-native English Speaking Teachers in the EFL Context

ทัศนคติของผู้เรียนต่อครูผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษที่เป็นเจ้าของภาษา และไม่เป็นเจ้าของภาษาในบริบทการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษ เป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

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Abstract

This paper examines the attitudes of EFL learners towards native and non-native English speaking teachers in the EFL context by reviewing some research findings as reported by educators in the field of English language teaching. Three main sections are presented. The first section looks into learners' attitudes towards EFL teachers. This is followed by a focus on how students' attitudes are towards native and non-native English speaking teachers. The second part sheds light on qualities of native and non-native English teachers, which are in fact mutually supportive, in their English teaching profession. The author's own research on learners' attitudes towards native and non-native English speaking teachers is introduced and discussed in the final part where it was found that EFL students under study perceived significant differences between native English and Thai English teachers in various areas.

Keywords: Attitudes, Native and Non-native English speaking teachers,
EFL (English as a Foreign Language)

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้วิเคราะห์ทัศนคติของผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษที่มีต่อครูผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษที่เป็นเจ้าของภาษาและไม่เป็นเจ้าของภาษาในบริบทการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ โดยการทบทวนสิ่งที่ค้นพบจากการวิจัยที่ผ่านมาโดยนักการศึกษาในสาขาการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ บทความแบ่งเป็น 3 ส่วนหลักคือ ส่วนแรกวิเคราะห์ให้เห็นทัศนคติของผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษที่มีต่อครูผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษในบริบทการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ ตามมาด้วยความสำคัญของทัศนคติของผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษที่มีต่อครูผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษที่เป็นเจ้าของภาษาและไม่เป็นเจ้าของภาษา ส่วนที่สองอภิปรายให้เห็นถึงคุณสมบัติของครูผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษที่เป็นเจ้าของภาษาและไม่เป็นเจ้าของภาษา ซึ่งแท้จริงแล้วส่งเสริมซึ่งกันและกันเป็นอย่างดีในสายอาชีพการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ ส่วนสุดท้ายนำเสนอและอภิปรายงานวิจัยของผู้เขียนเองเรื่องทัศนคติของผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษที่มีต่อครูผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษที่เป็นเจ้าของภาษาและไม่เป็นเจ้าของภาษา โดยพบว่า ผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศที่ทำการศึกษามองเห็นความแตกต่างอย่างมากระหว่างครูผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษที่เป็นเจ้าของภาษาและไม่เป็นเจ้าของภาษาในหลายๆ ด้านด้วยกัน

คำสำคัญ : ทัศนคติ ครูผู้สอนภาษาอังกฤษที่เป็นเจ้าของภาษาและไม่เป็นเจ้าของภาษา
ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ

Introduction

Students' attitudes are found to be a significant predictor of performance, competence and learning potential in EFL learning as they could determine EFL learners' learning behavior and motivation (Dehbozorgi, 2012). In particular, one of the most significant factors that could influence learners' attitudes towards EFL is teachers (Noels, 2003). In the EFL context, native and non-native speakers of English generally form two large cohorts of teachers. Certain attributes inherent in native and non-native English speaking teachers that supplement and fulfill one another well are discussed in this paper along with the author's own study.

EFL learners' attitudes towards EFL teachers and EFL teachers' influence

Many research studies have been carried out to investigate the attitudes of EFL learners towards EFL teachers, and the influence of EFL teachers on EFL learners. Clément et al. (1994) found that students' evaluations of their teachers' rapport with the class were associated with their linguistic confidence and anxiety. In addition, some EFL scholars have offered hypotheses regarding specific aspects of teachers' communicative style that influence students' motivational levels and behavioural styles. For instance, Dérynyi (1994) suggested that teachers' concomitant drive, authority type, and method of presenting tasks and providing feedback are pertinent to students' motivation and language learning behaviour. It would, therefore, seem that in a context where students are passive and less challenging such as in Thailand, EFL teachers would be considered 'authority figures', who are accorded a higher cultural and social status. Interestingly, McNamara (2000) pointed out from a Western researcher's viewpoint that 'Thai students rarely question the teacher - that is tantamount to disrespect and having doubts about the teacher's knowledge and, as we all know, what the teacher says is always correct'. Furthermore, Lee et al. (2009) in their research on Asian students' perceptions of a good university teacher asserted that in many Asian school education environments, student-centred learning is not the norm. Thus, teachers play a crucial role in students' learning style. As students move from high schools to colleges or universities, they are likely to carry this teacher-centred approach of learning with them. In the light of this, it is very likely that EFL teachers'

teaching styles, manner of presenting tasks and giving feedback, classroom behaviour and other related variables would affect students' styles in learning English.

In respect of a teaching style of communication, Deci & Ryan (1985) suggested that teaching style enhances students' self-determination. Controlling styles, such as the use of threats or rewards, deadlines, or imposed goals tend to undermine feelings of self-determination and intrinsic motivation, while autonomy-supportive styles sustain feelings of self-determination and hence intrinsic motivation. Also, compassionate and creative feedback that provides information about how to improve competencies tends to enhance intrinsic motivation and give rise to new challenges. In support of this proposition, Noels et al. (1999) demonstrated that attitudes towards the teacher as autonomy-supportive while providing constructive feedback are correlated with increased intrinsic motivation and achievement in the task in a small group of English learners.

Prasertsuk (1990) conducted a study to investigate the factors that affected students' motivation in learning English and other subjects in four different faculties in a university in Thailand. It was found that out of the 684 student participants, the factor that had the greatest influence on students' learning motivation was teachers' knowledge and accuracy in the subject matter. In particular, the sample of 220 students in the Faculty of Education reported that the most important factor that influenced their motivation in learning was teachers' effective teaching methods. 'Effective teaching methods' here refers to the teaching methods that enabled them to enjoy and understand their lessons. In addition, the results from the total sample population (n=684) showed that three of the most highly rated factors that affected their motivation in learning were:

- teachers' wide general knowledge and sensitivity to the present situation outside the classroom;
- sufficient degree of autonomy given to students in class; and
- teachers' help and encouragement.



On account of this, EFL teachers appear to play a very important role in the English learning process, particularly in the Thai context where the vast majority of learners have been taught using a rote learning method (McNamara, 2000). In such a learning context, teachers are considered almost sole providers of knowledge, while students generally learn only what teachers anticipate. The coverage is also only what is expected for assessment, and this too is decided mostly by teachers.

EFL learners' attitudes towards native and non-native English speaking teachers

Among teachers in an ESL or EFL context, according to Medgyes (1994, 1996), two major cohorts of teachers can be classified: native English speaking teachers and non-native English speaking teachers. This suggests that every English language teacher is either a native English speaking teacher or a non-native English speaking teacher. Such view is consistent with a number of research studies and literature which normally describe EFL teachers on the basis of their native and non-native status (e.g. Davies, 1991 and 2003; Braine, 1999; Liu, 1999; McLaughlin, 2000).

There are many different notions of the terms native and non-native speakers of English. Thus, in the context of this paper, a native speaker of English is someone who has learned English as first language in childhood. That means being a native speaker of a language is a fact which cannot be changed afterwards in life through training or learning (Cook, 2001). Non-native speakers of a language, on the other hand, are people who have learned this particular language as second or third language, but have a different language as native language. Medgyes (1996) stated that, "native English speakers have acquired English", while "non-native speakers [...] are still acquiring". The term 'non-native English language teachers' has created a division among professionals in the English language teaching profession. Supporters of the term believe that it is necessary to distinguish between native and non-native English speaking teachers because their differences are, in fact, their strengths and should be recognized.

There is evidence of research studies on attitudes of students towards native and non-native English speaking teachers conducted in various settings. Thomas (1995) carried out a research survey in Slovakia with 98 students, three-quarters of whom were university students while about one quarter were final year students from a high school. The survey was aimed at investigating the students' attitudes towards native and non-native English speaking teachers against certain criteria. In addition, the study attempted to examine the implications of student attitudes for future cooperation between these 2 groups of teachers. There was also a hidden agenda in carrying out the survey as the results would then be applied to the context of an ongoing project of the team teaching of native and non-native English speaking teachers being implemented at one department in the university.

A questionnaire with a rating scale was used as the only data gathering technique. The findings from the survey indicated differences between native and non-native English speaking teachers in several aspects such as teaching methods and classroom behavior. There were also areas where both groups of English teachers got a positive rating, including teachers' listening to students and general regard of students for their teachers' ability. Particularly, in the issue of teachers' language ability, the students who gave their opinions felt that there were almost no differences in language ability between native and non-native English speaking teachers and this was not at all a major concern for the students. Thomas (1995) pointed out that this gave such great encouragement especially to non-native English speaking teachers who often feel that they are constantly being judged negatively on their language ability by students.

Shimizu (1995) undertook a research survey of learners' attitudes towards native and non-native English speaking teachers in Japan where 1,088 Japanese students (871 females and 217 males) from eight colleges participated. The main goals were to investigate whether there were any differences in Japanese students' attitudes towards Japanese and native English speaking teachers and to report on qualities and attributes students felt were important in English teachers. In the findings, over half of the students felt that English classes taught by native English speaking teachers were interesting, humorous, and energetic, while those taught by Japanese teachers were gloomy, boring, strict and at times tedious. In most



cases, students indicated that qualities important for Japanese teachers and native English speaking teachers were the same, including being knowledgeable, reliable, and respectable in descending order. In sum, the results of the survey strongly suggested that Japanese English teachers and native English speaking teachers were perceived differently. Japanese teachers appeared to be valued more for scholarly skills such as intelligence and knowledge, whereas native English speaking teachers were of higher value for personal characteristics such as friendliness. Despite the feasibility of generalizing the findings to the wider population due to a large number of sample, Shimuzu (1995) was aware that the external validity of the study was limited as the majority of subjects who were female were from colleges in the same geographical area.

Small scale research studies were also conducted to investigate learners' attitudes towards native and non-native English speaking teachers. Amin (1994) reported that students who learned English in Canada expected their teacher to use what they perceived to be standard dialect associated with White native speakers of English, yet they are not certain about what this standard dialect is. Because of this perception, a number of EFL students consider only native speakers to know 'real' and 'proper' English and only White Caucasian people as native speakers of English. This is in line with Lippi-Green's (1997), Hoodfar's (1992) and Lee (2000)'s studies which indicated that teachers with non-native accents were perceived by students as less qualified and less effective and were compared unfavorably with their native counterparts. This bias becomes stronger in an English conversation class where there is an assumption that the teacher in speaking classes should be fluent in the target language, and in general, such fluency is associated with a native English speaking teacher (Kramsch, 1997).

In these cases, non-native English speaking teachers appear to have a natural-born defect, namely the foreign accent, which cannot be converted into the standard dialect associated with native speakers, and this alone is seen to make a non-native English speaking teacher a poor teacher in the eyes of students (Lee, 2003). Raddaoui (2000) also remarks that a great number of EFL students are stereotyped that only 'blue-eyed, fair-haired' native English speakers are the ideal English teachers, which unfairly puts a vast number of non-native English speaking

teachers who are well-trained English language teaching professionals at a disadvantage. This proposition is reflected by Canagarajah (1999) who found that native speakers of various international varieties of English, such as Indian or Singapore English, were considered less credible and less competent users than those who come from what Kachru (1985) defines as “countries of the Inner Circle” (i.e. Great Britain, the United States, Canada, Australian, and New Zealand).

Having had similar experiences, Amin (1997), Thomas (1999) and Braine (1999) reported challenges to credibility of non-native English speaking teachers just because they were not perceived by their students as native English speaking teachers. However, Braine (1999) and Thomas (1999) discovered that although students initially perceive native English speaking teachers as perfect models in language learning, as they become better acquainted with qualified, competent non-native English speaking teachers, students often enjoy being in their classes, knowing that non-native English speaking teachers better understand their language problems and needs. Moreover, Auerbach et al. (1996) revealed that students in their study asserted the use of effective curriculum and pedagogy of non-native English speaking teachers after being taught by them.

In the Thai context, to the writer’s knowledge, there seem to be few studies undertaken regarding understanding students’ attitudes towards native and non-native English speaking teachers. A small survey conducted in Thailand to ask students would prefer to study with native or non-native English speaking teachers revealed that the majority of the students would strongly prefer to study with native English speaking teachers (Avasadanond, 2002). These students have a preference to study with native English speaking teachers because of a better chance to improve their English accent and learn more about social and cultural differences. Watson & Pojanapunya (2009) reported the similar findings in which the students’ attitudes towards native and non-native teachers of English were complex with an explicit preference for native English speaking teachers. The major strength of native English speaking teachers was identified as teaching pronunciation while non-native English speaking teachers were perceived to be strong in learning strategies.

From the above, the writer believes that the issues derived from investigating students' attitudes towards native and non-native English speaking teachers are worth examining, and more recent research findings might bring about further understanding towards the dichotomy of native and non-native perspectives. It appears that it is impossible to deny the existence of differences between native and non-native English speaking teachers. In this way, the reported differences help to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of both native and non-native English speaking teachers and in any educational setting, native and non-native English speaking teachers working together are not uncommon these days. As Medgyes (1992) remarks, 'the ideal non-native English speaking teacher and the ideal non-native English speaking teacher arrive from different directions but eventually stand quite close to one another...in an ideal school, native English speaking teachers and non-native English speaking teachers possess both fortes and flaws'. What qualities native and non-native English speaking teachers have should then be discussed.

Qualities of native and non-native English speaking teachers

According to Gill & Rebrova (2001), there are certain qualities integral in both native English speaking teachers and non-native English speaking teachers who have the potential to complement one another. These intrinsic qualities are considered to be true not only in ideal situations but in all situations in the countries where English is being taught as a second or foreign language. Followings are the qualities being discussed.

Familiarity with learning

McNeill's research (1994) indicates that non-native English speaking teachers seem to have a greater ability in predicting the students' difficulties in language learning, especially in the area of vocabulary needs. This is probably because non-native English speaking teachers have had the same difficulties as their students while learning the 1 language themselves. They have first-hand experience in learning and using a second 1 language, and their experience has sensitized them to the linguistic and cultural needs of their students. In accordance

with this idea, Medgyes (1992) suggests that only non-native English speaking teachers

- can serve as imitable models of the successful learner of English;
- can teach learning strategies more effectively;
- provide learners with more information about the English language;
- are more able to anticipate learning difficulties;
- can be more empathetic to the needs and problems of their learners, and
- can benefit from sharing the learners' mother tongues (pp. 346-347).

These advantages, particularly the first and the last points, would thus give non-native English speaking teachers particular values,. According to Lee (2000), the non-native English speaking teachers are perceived as good role models for their ESL/EFL students and can become not only fluent speakers but also English teachers. Spratt (1985) asserted that the use of the mother tongue in L2 teaching can be of value not only for the effective explanation of abstract notions but also for class management, for anticipating and explaining interference, and in the realm of translation.

Linguistic familiarity

In the area of language use, few of any non-native English speaking teachers can compete with native English speaking teachers even if their language competence is very high or near-native (Gill & Rebrova, 2001). The knowledge of English of non-native English speaking teachers very often comes from books rather than direct contact with authentic sources. However, according to Matsuda (2003) and Lee (2003), this should not be dealt with merely as a non-native English speaking teacher's deficit since the non-native English speaking teacher can employ authentic sources for the purpose of completing his or her knowledge and to furnish students with examples of such real sources of English.

Widdowson (1994) notes that it is generally accepted that the native English speaking teachers have more intuitions about colloquialism. Nevertheless, when the emphasis is moved from the contexts of use to contexts of learning, the advantage that the native English speaking teachers have may disappear. In essence, the native English speaker teachers are better aware of the appropriate contexts of language use, not the contexts of language learning. It is also important to note



that the native English speaking teachers perse without a learner's own endeavor do not contribute to the learner's successful language acquisition.

In the area of grammar, non-native English speaking teachers may not be more competent than native English speaking teachers, but they are often capable of explaining rules and language structure more explicitly (Harmer, 1991). This is because non-native English speaking teachers have undergone the process of learning grammar rules formally. This claim is supported by Harmer (1991) who states that 'average native speakers do not consciously know any grammar and could not produce any rules of grammar without their study, but they do have a language competence which is subconscious and allows them to generate grammatically correct sentences'. It, however, remains unquestionable that native English speaking teachers, who are well trained and experienced, have added to their language competence a conscious knowledge of English.

Cultural background knowledge of English

There is a tradition of placing foreign language studies within a context of their cultural backgrounds (Gill & Rebrova, 2001). In other words, in the study of a foreign language like English, sufficient cultural understandings of the language community where that foreign language is used are central in learning. In this regard, clearly native English speaking teachers are equipped with cultural background knowledge and have an advantage over non-native English speaking teachers. On the other hand, this knowledge can be limited to one culture or one English speaking country only, while curricula may demand information on several major English speaking countries. Nevertheless, the presence of the native English speaking teachers broadens the horizons not only of local students but also non-native English speaking teacher colleagues. It can play a particularly important role in making a better understanding of the native English speaking teacher's culture and tradition. After all, it would seem that the existence of multinational and multicultural teaching personnel contributes to a better understanding of each other's traditions, customs and mentality, helps eliminate prejudices and stereotypes, and creates a higher degree of tolerance towards each other.

Having discussed the inherent qualities of both groups of teachers, the writer would next address the research on Thai university students' attitudes towards native and non-native English teaching speakers conducted by the writer. The discussion would also reflect on how the findings of the study reveal consistencies or differences with the qualities of native and non-native English speaking teachers aforementioned.

The writer's study on Thai university students' attitudes towards native and non-native English teaching speakers

The writer investigated the attitudes of Thai university students at a private university in Thailand towards native English speaking teachers and Thai English teachers. An attempt was also made to explore the effect of attitudes held towards these two groups of English teachers on the participants' learning behaviours and motivation to learn English. Part of the investigation covered the exploration of favourable qualities of each of these two groups of English teachers.

Two research instruments, the open-ended questionnaire and the semi-structured interview were employed for this study. The questionnaire administered with 31 participants was the main data collection tool. The interview carried out afterwards with 14 of the participants served as a supplementary source. In some cases the interview was used to crosscheck the questionnaire results. The data from each research tool were analysed allowing categories to emerge from the data. Then, the results were discussed in accordance with the existing literature.

The findings indicated significant differences perceived between native English and Thai English teachers in many areas. These areas comprise the teaching methods and styles; the understanding of students' problems; grading and marking; language proficiency; personality, classroom behaviour and discipline; and the ability to communicate and interact with learners. Some differences were also reported between these two groups of teachers in the way they assigned work and arranged classroom learning activities and their attitudes towards students. It is suggested that to teach English effectively both native and Thai English teachers should have teaching experience and English language training and that Thai English teachers should attempt to speak and write like their native counterparts. Most participants had a strong preference to study with native English speaking teachers if the option is provided.

There appears to be a strong positive relationship between studying with native English speaking teachers and the participants' learning behaviours and motivation to learn English. Also, the socio-cultural factors particularly the cultural aspects embedded within the Thai learning context are found to have considerable bearings on the participants' attitudes.

The two most favourable traits of native English speaking teachers and Thai English teachers are generosity and understanding student's attitudes and teaching methods proper for Thai students. These preferred qualities are related to personality traits rather than scholarly skills.

Conclusion

In this paper, the writer attempts to draw attention to the importance of students' attitudes towards EFL teachers especially to native English speaking teachers and non-native English speaking teachers. Learners' attitudes towards native English speaking teachers and non-native English speaking teachers seem to vary from context to context. Generally speaking, EFL students see native English speaking teachers as ideal models in learning English owing the perceived 'native speaker' attribute. However, many related studies reveal that over the past years competent non-native English speaking teachers have been increasingly favored and regarded positively since they are able to understand the needs and difficulties of EFL learners and their pedagogical techniques are well-refined as a result of heightened lesson preparation. More recent investigations into this area are needed as a myriad of non-native English speaking teachers teach in EFL contexts, but there appears to be a dearth of research into students' attitudes towards native and non-native English speaking teachers.

EFL students' attitudes towards native and non-native English teachers conducted in recent studies, some of which reviewed in this paper, appear to be in line with intrinsic qualities of both groups of teachers discussed earlier. In a nutshell, non-native English speaking teachers are familiar with learning a foreign language as they have directly put themselves into the process so their experience with learning has made them sensitive to the linguistic and cultural needs of their students. On the other hand, native English speaking teachers are familiar and

proficient with English language use, so in terms of English competence they can communicate and interact almost effortlessly. Moreover, native English speaking teachers have keen cultural background knowledge of English, which is important for learning for EFL students.

The writer's own research in general confirms the validity of such inherent qualities of native and non-native English speaking teachers as most participants in the study reported seeing differences between native English and non-native English teachers principally in terms of teaching methods, realizing students' problems, grading, English proficiency, and personality. Ability to use English fluently and the perceived label of 'native speaker of English' were the main reasons they would opt for study if possible with native English speaking teachers whom they believed could affect their motivation and behavior in learning English.

The writer's research also points to favorable traits of native English speaking teachers and non-native English teachers where it was found that preferred qualities were related more to personality rather than academic skills. Personal qualities of native English speaking teachers and non-native English speaking teachers are in fact a crucial factor that has often been overlooked. Although some are culturally influenced, the personal and special qualities of native English speaking teachers and non-native English speaking teachers deserve strenuous consideration as they may have great bearing on second/foreign students in a certain context (Gill & Rebrova, 2001). In fact, research studies conducted by Long (1997), Hadley & Hadley (1996), Shimizu (1995), Cutrone (2001) and Scott & De la Fuente (2008) have found that second/foreign learners seem to be more concerned with the personal characteristics of their teachers than their ability to teach. This certainly calls for further research and analysis in various contexts as well as cultures.

One thing for certain, with native and non-native English speaking teachers working, collaborating and sharing resources together in schools and universities, linguistic diversity seen among the students in EFL contexts could be better reflected among the teachers, with specific focus on language expertise and teaching ability.



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