

A Preliminary Survey of Second Language Learners' Attitudes toward Native and Non-native ESL/EFL Teachers

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Abstract

Native English speakers have traditionally been considered the model teachers of English as a Second Language; however, other views contend that it is competence in the language and teaching proficiency that determines the best teacher. The opinions on this issue that have gone largely unexplored are those of the students themselves. This paper presents the results of a survey of current ESL students in an American institution of higher education to determine the value that second language learners place on native versus non-native speaking ESL and EFL teachers. The results of this study indicate that these second language learners place high value on having native speaking teachers in the areas of speaking skills, pronunciation, accent, and knowledge of American culture. On the other hand, they value non-native speaking teachers for their sympathy and their ability to explain language rules explicitly.

Introduction

As the use of English continues to proliferate globally, it is now realized that there are more people speaking English as a second language than as native speakers (Llurda, 2004). As increasing numbers of people attempt to acquire English, the educational profession is being progressively more challenged to meet the need for qualified ESL and EFL teachers. According to Tarnopolsky (2000), there will never be a sufficient number of native English speaking teachers to meet the growing demand world wide. Consequently, a steadily increasing number of English language teachers today are not native speakers of the language (Maum, 2002). As a result, native speech as a qualification for ESL and EFL teaching is becoming increasingly an issue of interest to scholars, researchers, and educators. This paper will address this issue through a review of the present literature as well as through a survey recently conducted of current ESL students in an American higher education institution.

Literature Review

The concept of “nativeness” is controversial and has been defined in various ways. According to Brutt-Griffler and Samimy (2001), national origin is one of the most common frameworks used in defining the native speaker, and it is often assumed that only a few countries in the world qualify to produce true native English speakers. As a starting point for this paper, ‘native speaker’ will be defined as a speaker of the first language that a person learns, usually in the corresponding mother-tongue country, and continues to use as his or her dominant language. This definition, however, has limitations, some of which will be discussed later in the paper.

Traditional views have held that the model teacher of ESL/EFL was the native English speaker (Phillipson, as cited in Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 2001). This idea was perpetuated at the 1961 Commonwealth Conference on the Teaching of English as a Second Language in Makerere, Uganda, where the role of the native speaker was stressed (Maum, 2002). In asserting the importance

of standard English, Quirk (as cited in Canagarajah, 1999) further validated the value of native speech, and Medgyes (as cited in Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999) stated that the non-native speaker “labors eternally under a linguistic handicap” (p. 129). In fact, Medgyes (1992) emphatically asserted that no other personal or pedagogical advantages could equalize the competence levels between native and non-native speakers. This assumption has since been challenged by many scholars and educators such as Kramsch (as cited in Braine, 1999), who argued that birthplace should not be a determining factor for native speaker status in this case. The idea that native speakers make the best teachers was criticized by Phillipson (as cited in Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 2001) as “the native speaker fallacy.” Other scholars, such as Mododiano (as cited in Llorca, 2004) pointed out that it is proficiency in language, rather than national origin, that makes a competent speaker.

While views negating the importance of nativeness are increasingly being accepted among scholars, attitudes within the English language teaching business and among second language learners (the consumers in this business) appear to still favor the native speaker ESL/EFL teacher, with native English speakers often hired for teaching positions over more qualified non-native speaking teachers (Amin; Braine; Canagarajah; Rampton, as cited in Maum, 2002). Lippi-Green (as cited in Maum, 2002) found that accent, in particular, favored the hiring of native English speaking teachers. Even native speakers of English from countries such as India and Singapore are not considered by some institutions to be as credible, based on their accents, as teachers from countries such as the

United States or Britain (Thomas, 1999). Today, professional educator organizations such as TESOL are tackling the issue of nativeness and its effect on discrimination in hiring for teaching positions (Massou, 2006). Another aspect of this issue that should be taken into account is that of the prevailing attitudes and expectations of the ESL and EFL students themselves. By means of surveying and interviewing current ESL students for this paper, it can be seen that student attitudes towards native versus non-native ESL/EFL teachers mirror the findings reported in the literature.

Research Question

This paper will explore the following question: What value do learners of English as a second language learners place on native versus non-native teachers?

Methodology

Survey questionnaires were distributed in March, 2008, to all students of four English Foundations Program (EFP) classes at Hawaii Pacific University (HPU). A total of 33 surveys were collected and used for data analysis. Proficiency levels of students surveyed ranged from intermediate to advanced, by HPU criteria, with students in one level for a particular ESL skill often in another level for another skill. With the exception of one Brazilian and one Saudi Arabian student, all participants were from Asian countries. In addition to the general surveys, five students were selected for focus group interviews, including two Japanese students, two Taiwanese students, and the Saudi Arabian student. These students were interviewed by the researcher outside of the class. They were

selected before the results of their surveys were read.

Materials

The survey questionnaire consisted of the following five questions, using a “yes” or “no” answer format:

6. When I came to America to study English, I expected my teachers to be native English speakers.
7. If my teachers in America were not native English speakers, I would be disappointed.
8. In my home country, when I study English, I prefer my English teachers to be native English speakers.
9. In my home country, I am just as happy if my English teachers speak excellent English, but are native speakers of my own language.
10. In my home country, I would pay more to go to a language school if the English teachers are all native English speakers.

After the surveys were completed, the five focus group students were asked to provide personal comments to amplify the information on the survey questionnaire.

It is important to note that the questionnaire contained the following possible limitations. The questions asked were general in nature and did not target specific traits of a good teacher (contrasting with, for example, Goto Butler’s (2007) study). The questionnaire did not present students with the possibility of having a non-native speaking teacher who is both highly competent and familiar with American culture. By the same token, the questionnaire did not address the possibility of native speaking teachers who are not competent users of

their own language. Also, the questions did not define the terms ‘native’ and ‘non-native’, but rather left it to the students to make their own assumptions. Finally, the language in some questions may have skewed the respondents’ perceptions and answers. The results in this study thus need to be interpreted in light of these limitations, and further surveys are needed with more informed, specific, and balanced questions.

Data Collection

To collect data, the survey was distributed by hand in four ESL classrooms by the researcher. Permission to distribute the surveys was given in advance by the classroom teachers. All students present were provided with the questionnaires, with the exception of students who had filled them out in another class. After the surveys were completed, five of the students surveyed were asked to provide additional comments on their responses. The surveys of these five students had not been reviewed when they were asked to participate as focus group students.

The one obstacle encountered in this procedure was a lack of sufficient classroom time to provide a more detailed questionnaire. Since the survey took up valuable classroom time, it was thought that asking for more class time would be an imposition on the classroom teacher. Generally, five to ten minutes of the classroom period was allocated to filling out the questionnaires. In terms of the focus group students, each student spent approximately 10 additional minutes on discussion, but due to language proficiency issues, their comments were not as extensive as they would have been had they been able to speak in their native languages.

Analytical Procedure

Responses to each question were tallied individually to gain a percentage result for that question (see Appendix A). Questions 1 and 2 collected data on current ESL experiences, and questions 3, 4, and 5 collected data on previous EFL experience.

The additional data from the five focus group students were used as a source of further information to augment the general survey data. These observations were helpful to gain personal perspectives of sample students to better understand specific attitudes towards native versus non-native teachers in the different teaching contexts.

In addition to the survey questions, data results are shown in Appendix A. Comments of focus group students can be found in Appendix B.

Findings and Discussion

Data analysis from this survey suggests that native speaker fluency and an American accent were the qualities most desired by these students. Ninety percent of students surveyed responded that they expected to have American native speakers as teachers when they came to the United States to study English, and nearly three-quarters of the students reported that they would have been disappointed if they did not. Focus group students specifically mentioned “American tone,” “American accent,” “American speaking,” “pronunciation,” “learn English from Americans,” and “learn English from the native” as reasons for studying English at an American institution. These comments support Lippi Green’s claim (as cited in Maum, 2002) that accent represents the greatest challenge for non-native speaking English

teachers and leads to the perception that non-native speakers are not as qualified or effective as native speakers. The following responses from focus group students illustrate specific student perceptions in this area.

“For speaking I want American for pronunciation. Non-native speakers don’t get certain expressions, how to say things appropriately. I don’t trust how non-native teacher can use appropriate expression. I want to know if word is good or bad. Non-native cannot explain. American speaker knows.” (Japanese speaker)

“I came to America because I want to learn English from Americans. In Saudi Arabia I hear some British accent, but I want to learn American accent...It is not the same than if you learn from natives.” (Arabic speaker)

The above comments support Widdowson’s assertion (as cited in Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 2001) that “what native speakers say is invested with both authenticity and authority” (p. 105), and suggest that in addition to pronunciation and accent, students are concerned with nuance and deeper understanding of language.

A larger study, conducted of 312 Korean grade school children in Korea (Goto Butler, 2007), also found marked preference for native-speaker sounding English. In this matched guise study, tape recordings of Korean-accented and American-accented speech were used to evaluate student performance as well as preference for native versus non-native English speaking teachers. While the results did not find any significant differences in student comprehension or performance when listening to either Korean-accented or American-accented speech, the students themselves expressed strong personal preference for having a

teacher with American-accented speech and gave that speaker higher ratings.

Non-native teachers are often aware that students can often feel disappointment and resentment at not having a native speaking teacher (Maum, 2002, Moussu, 2006). From personal experience, Thomas (1999), a non-native speaker, told of wanting at times to say, “Yes this IS an ENGLISH class and I AM the teacher” when noting students’ surprise and confusion at seeing her as the teacher. This disappointment can spread even to native English speakers who do not match student expectations of what an English language teacher should look like; Moussou (2006) quotes a Korean ESL teacher, raised in the U.S. since childhood, as saying that students often regard him “with a mixture of surprise, skepticism and disappointment” when he identifies himself as a native English speaker (p. 28). Consequently, non-native speaking teachers often feel that they have to work harder to establish credibility (Thomas, 1999).

As noted in the comment above, grammar represents a linguistic skill that is often thought to be better taught by non-native speaker teachers who can use the student’s source language as a resource and who often can explain how the language works in explicit terms. Several focus group students indicated that grammar is an area in which they are satisfied to get a non-native speaking English teacher, as illustrated by the following responses:

“First I went to different school [in the U.S.]. My teacher was grammar teacher. Was Japanese. First day I was disappointed. But Japanese teachers very good at grammar. So it was OK that I had Japanese teacher.” (Japanese speaker)

“Japanese teachers know how to resolve grammar problems. They know how to study for TOEFL and TWE.” (Japanese speaker)

“Japanese teacher is better for grammar. They can explain grammar better because they understand what is the problem for non-native speaker.” (Japanese speaker)

The above comments appear to corroborate Britton’s assertion (as cited in Caravanajah, 1999) that teachers who speak more than one language may have stronger grammar knowledge, making them more skillful in teaching this area than would be monolingual native English speakers. Some focus group students, however, indicated preference for American native speaking teachers in all areas of language study:

“I can learn better grammar and speaking from American speaker. Maybe all.” (Taiwanese speaker)

Maybe a Saudi school is good, but Americans have more information on the language. Saudi teachers only applying what someone else told them. (Arabic speaker)

Affective factors sometimes appear to positively influence student appreciation for the non-native teacher. Qualities that students appear to appreciate in non-native speaking English teachers include understanding and empathy for language learners, as seen in the following focus group comment:

Non-native teacher know about our emotions in studying another language. Have sympathy. So it was OK that I have non-native teacher.” (Japanese speaker)

According to Maum (2002), non-native English teachers are highly cognizant of the differences between the source and target languages, allowing them to better anticipate the difficulties of

their students. He also mentioned that an additional advantage of non-native teachers is that they have had to develop their own language learning skills and strategies, and thus can transmit that learning to their students (Tarnopolsky, 2000). To illustrate the complex feelings engendered in this issue, Thomas (1999) quoted from two of her students' journal entries. One student wrote *"I am happy. You like us. You understand my feelings about English."* (p. 12). However, she also quoted another student who praised her kindness and the comfort level of the class, but finished by saying *"We need native speaker teacher. It will be better"* (p. 10).

Learning about American culture, both in their home countries and in the ESL situation, was another area where students preferred American teachers, as reflected in the following focus group comments:

"I want to learn American culture different from someone in my culture. Better teacher if she's American." (Taiwanese speaker)

"I very care. Better to have American teacher. I hope it's American teach me about American culture." (Taiwanese speaker)

"Americans can tell me about American culture and helps me to connect with other people. I want to connect with Americans like you." (Arabic speaker)

In counterpoint to the view that only native speakers can truly help students understand American culture, Tarnopolsky (2000) contended that, particularly in the EFL context, only the non-native English speaking teacher is able to compare the cultural elements of English to that of the home culture. He suggested that constant comparison between the two is necessary in order to develop an understanding of a different

culture. Still, it is easy to see from the responses of the students in this study that, as Brutt-Griffler & Samimy (2001) asserted, nativeness still exerts a powerful influence in the field of English language teaching. Students surveyed were equally divided as to whether or not they would pay additional money in the EFL context to have native English speaking teachers. Focus group student comments suggest that if finances were not a consideration, they would pay more for native speaker teachers for conversation, pronunciation and accent, as illustrated in the following responses:

"Yes, because I want to learn to talk like American. American teacher tone is better. I want to learn American culture. Better for personal conversation if American." (Taiwanese speaker)

"I would pay more for American conversation school. I don't want to pay more for Japanese teachers, but I would pay extra to have native speakers for conversation." (Japanese speaker)

If this survey is taken as representative of ESL/EFL students in higher education, it appears that native English speakers will continue to be in high demand in both contexts. As a result, according to Braine (1999), this preference strongly influences EFL teacher hiring in Asia and the Middle East, where native English speech is frequently the primary qualification for teaching positions. In an interesting twist, native speakers of American English can face discrimination as EFL teachers in countries such as Hong Kong, where native British speech is often required (Braine, 1999). Even in Japan, which does not have a colonial tradition of British English, an advertisement on the Internet stated "IF YOU HAVE A NORTH

AMERICAN ACCENT YOU ARE NOT ELIGIBLE TO APPLY” (emphasis in the original), (p. 26).

While students in my study indicated that they did not, realistically, expect to find native speaking teachers in their home country, almost three-quarters of these students indicated that their ideal teacher would be an English native speaker, even in the EFL context.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

Based on the results and given the limitations of the methodology mentioned above, it may be tentatively concluded that some learners of English as a second language placed significant value on having native speaking English teachers in higher education ESL/EFL learning. The students in this survey, having chosen to study in the U.S., seemed to value having American teachers, particularly in the areas of speaking skill, pronunciation, and accent. Learning about American culture also appeared to be a significant factor in the choice to study English in the U.S., and represented another area where higher value was placed on native speaking English teachers. Student attitudes in the areas of speech and culture also appeared to spread to the EFL context. On the other hand, students also valued proficient non-native speakers when it comes to knowledge of explicit grammar rules and sympathy.

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With the steady advance of English globally, the issue of native versus non-native teachers will most likely continue to be debated. Organizations such as TESOL have issued active position statements against discrimination in teacher hiring based on nativeness (Massou, 2006). It is obvious that non-native teachers, due to population and financial considerations, will play an increasingly important role in English as a second and foreign language education. Greater focus on the strengths of non-native teachers, as well as improved teacher training methods for both native and non-native English speaking teachers, may lead to decreased discrimination and equal employment. In addition, as new ideas in the field of English as an International Language (EIL) emerge, attitudes towards native versus non-native teachers may shift and change. According to McKay (as cited in Llorca, 2004), EIL will likely stress the connections between English and the source language and culture of the student, and thus may be seen as better taught by the source language teacher. While it appears, from the study conducted for this paper and from the literature reviewed, that native-speaking English teachers seem to be held in higher esteem at the present time by some, the merits of native versus non-native teachers will undoubtedly continue to be debated over the coming decades.

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Appendix A

Survey Results

Question	Response
When I came to America to study English, I expected my teachers to be native English speakers.	Total = 33 Yes: 29 (91%) No: 4 (9%)
If my teachers in America were not native English speakers, I would be disappointed.	Total = 33 Yes: 23 (70%) No: 10 (30%)
In my home country, when I study English, I prefer my English teachers to be native English speakers.	Total = 33 Yes: 24 (73%) No: 9 (27%)
In my home country, I am just as happy if my English teachers speak excellent English, but are native speakers of my own language.	Total = 33 Yes: 25 (76%) No: 8 (24%)
In my home country, I would pay more to go to a language school if the English teachers are all native English speakers.	Total = 32 Yes: 16 (50%) No: 16 (50%)

Appendix B

Focus Group Comments

When I came to America to study English, I expected my teachers to be native English speakers.

“Yes, because I am coming to America to learn American tone and American culture.”
(Taiwanese speaker)

“Yes, because I can learn better grammar and speaking from American speakers. Maybe all.”
(Taiwanese speaker)

“Yes, that is why I came to study here.” (Japanese speaker)

“Native speaker is better for accent and pronunciation.” (Japanese speaker)

“Yes, I came to American because I want to learn English from Americans. In Saudi Arabia I hear some British accents, but I want to learn American accent.” (Arabic speaker)

If my teachers in America were not native English speakers, I would be disappointed.

“Because if I pay a lot of money, I want different from my home country. Better for learning to speak American tone. I want to learn American culture different than someone in my culture. Better teacher if she’s American.” (Taiwanese speaker)

“I hope it’s American, but if not, I hope teacher would be good.” (Taiwanese speaker)

“Once I had Korean teacher at another school. I was disappointed because of pronunciation. For speaking I want American for pronunciation. Non-native speakers don’t get certain expression, how to say things appropriately. I don’t trust how non-native teacher can use appropriate expressions. I want to know if word is good or bad. Non-native can not explain. American speaker knows.” (Japanese speaker)

“First I went to different school. My teacher was grammar teacher. Was Japanese. First day I was disappointed. But Japanese teachers very good at grammar. Non-native teacher know about our emotions in studying another language, have sympathy. So it was OK that I have non-native teacher.” (Japanese speaker)

“It is more helpful to learn English from the native. The native know how to speak best. In my home, we have a worker from Indonesia. She did not speak one Arabic word. But because she live with my family, she learned our language from my mother and me. Now she speaks just like us. Because she learned from natives.” (Arabic speaker)

In my home country, when I study English, I prefer my English teachers to be native English speakers.

“I’m very care. Better to have American teacher. I hope it’s American teach me about American culture.” (Taiwanese speaker)

“Because it is better to learn American tone, but not many American teachers in Taiwan.”
(Taiwanese speaker)

“In Japan, there is less opportunity to talk with native speakers. There are less native speaker teachers. So it is good to have American teacher, but there is not many.” (Japanese speaker)

“In Japan, I don’t expect to get native teacher because it is difficult to get native – you have to pay a lot. So I can’t pay for native teacher in Japan.” (Japanese speaker)

“The Saudi teachers are not fluent, the accent is different. It’s not good to study at home with these teachers. It’s easy to learn here because I can listen to American teachers.” (Arabic speaker)

In my home country, I am just as happy if my teachers speak excellent English, but are speakers of my own language.

“No, but there are not many Americans in my home town, so I don’t expect to get American teacher.” (Taiwanese speaker)

“In Taiwan I can not get American teacher so I hope I get good teacher.” (Taiwanese speaker)

“Japanese teachers know how to resolve grammar problems. They know how to study for TOEFL and TWE.”

“Japanese teacher is better for grammar. They can explain grammar better because they understand what is the problem for non-native speaker.” (Japanese speaker)

“It is not the same than if you learn from natives.” (Arabic speaker)

In my home country, I would pay more to go to a language school if the English teachers are all native English speakers.

“I will study in expensive school because some Taiwanese pronunciation is not so well.” (Taiwanese speaker)

“Yes because I want to learn to talk like American. American teacher tone is better.”

“I want to learn American culture. Better for personal conversation if American.” (Taiwanese speaker)

“I would pay more for American conversation school. I don’t want to pay more for Japanese teachers but I would pay extra to have native speakers for conversation. In Japan, most students want to talk to native speakers but can not.” (Japanese speaker)

“I can not pay more for native speaker in Japan.” (Japanese speaker)

“Yes, because it’s important. Maybe a Saudi school is good, but Americans have more information on the language. Saudi teachers only applying what someone else told them.” The accent is not right. Americans can tell me about American culture and helps me to connect with other people. I want to connect with Americans like you.” (Arabic speaker)