



The Effect of Native-English-Speaking Teachers on EFL Learners' Attitudes and Motivation in Learning English as an International Language

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ABSTRACT

The increasing demand for Native-English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context has raised debates on their effectiveness in influencing learners' attitudes and motivation compared to Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs). This study aims to analyze the impact of NESTs on EFL learners' attitudes and motivation in learning English as an International Language (EIL) by employing a literature review method. Academic articles from 2010 to 2024 were examined to synthesize evidence on the topic. The findings reveal that while NESTs are often regarded as proficient language models, they face challenges related to understanding students' linguistic problems, teaching methodologies, and cultural contexts. Conversely, NNESTs demonstrate better empathy towards learners' difficulties and familiarity with local educational systems, fostering positive attitudes and higher motivation among students. Furthermore, misconceptions about the superiority of NESTs over NNESTs are debunked, showing that teacher effectiveness is not solely determined by their native status. The study concludes that the presence of NESTs in EFL contexts does not necessarily enhance students' attitudes and motivation, emphasizing the need for pedagogical training and cultural sensitivity in teaching English as an international language.

Introduction

The growing importance of English as an International Language (EIL) results in an increasing number of English language teaching institutions, especially in English as a foreign language (EFL) countries. These institutions are said to be likely to hire a native-English speaking teacher (NEST) to teach the English courses, either for the assumption of giving better model in pronunciation and grammar intuition compared to a non-native-English speaking teacher (NNEST) or for marketing reasons (Mckay, 2002). Proponents of this view argue that NESTs bring authentic linguistic input, such as natural expressions and idiomatic usage, which are difficult for NNESTs to replicate (Braine, 2010). They are also perceived as providing a more accurate model of pronunciation, which is often seen as crucial for learners aspiring to achieve native-like fluency (Phillipson, 1992; Phillipson, 2018). Additionally, NESTs are sometimes associated with more interactive and communicative teaching methods, which are considered beneficial in promoting oral fluency.

However, the assumption that NESTs should be prioritized in teaching positions has been questioned by several scholars. Medgyes (1992), for example, argues that NNESTs can offer more effective teaching strategies because they have a deeper understanding of the language difficulties faced by learners compared to NESTs. This argument is also supported by the recent research on students' perception of their NEST and NNESTs (Chun, 2014; Ma, 2012; Rao, 2010; Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2012) which shows that most students feel more comfortable with NNESTs as they are sensitive to students' linguistic problems and share students' cultural and educational systems, even though the students agree that NESTs are the better proficient models. Based on this ongoing debate, this article will argue that the presence of NESTs in the EFL context does not necessarily lead to positive student attitudes nor does it enhance their motivation to learn English.

Method

This study employed a critical literature review approach to analyze and synthesize existing research on the impact of Native-English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) on EFL learners' attitudes and motivation in learning English as an International Language. This approach goes beyond summarizing existing studies by critically evaluating their methodologies, findings, and theoretical frameworks to uncover patterns, contradictions, and

gaps in the literature. Articles published between 2010 and 2024 were prioritized to ensure the relevancy of the study and to ensure the inclusion of the most recent studies. These studies were identified through a structured search in academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC. Keywords such as "Native English-speaking teachers," "EFL learners," "motivation," "attitudes," and "English as an International Language" were used.

Results and Discussion

Complex Role of NESTs in EFL Contexts: Challenges in Student Attitudes and Motivation

The increasing demand for Native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) in Asian countries, particularly in public education systems, reflects broader shifts in language pedagogy and educational policies. This trend has been particularly pronounced in the last two decades as the spread of English as an International Language (EIL) has influenced educational strategies in countries such as Japan, Korea, and China. The adoption of the communicative approach to language teaching, which prioritizes interaction and fluency over rote memorization of grammar rules, has been a key driver in the push for NESTs (Kasai et al., 2011). Proponents of this approach argue that NESTs are inherently suited to model authentic language use, including natural expressions, idiomatic speech, and cultural nuances that are integral to effective communication. The assumption here is that NESTs, being exposed to English in real-life contexts, bring authenticity to language teaching that Non-Native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) cannot provide.

However, the reliance on NESTs as a solution to improve language proficiency does not necessarily translate to positive outcomes in terms of students' attitudes or motivation. Recent studies have highlighted various limitations associated with NESTs in the EFL context. For example, Walkinshaw & Oanh (2012) found that while students generally appreciated NESTs for their fluency and pronunciation, many expressed dissatisfaction with their teaching strategies and inability to address students' specific learning difficulties. This dissatisfaction often stemmed from a lack of empathy and understanding of the linguistic and cultural challenges faced by EFL learners.

Similarly, Chun (2014) argues that students in Asian EFL classrooms often feel alienated or intimidated by NESTs due to cultural and linguistic differences. Students may struggle to connect with NESTs who are unfamiliar with their native languages or the local educational systems. This disconnect can lead to frustration, reduced confidence, and a sense of inadequacy among learners, ultimately diminishing their motivation to engage in the language learning process.

Another critical issue is the assumption that NESTs inherently excel at teaching English simply because they are native speakers. Jin & Cortazzi (2011) emphasize that NESTs, while proficient in the language, may lack the pedagogical training and skills necessary to address the unique needs of EFL students. Without adequate training, NESTs often fail to provide the structured support that students require to develop their language skills. In contrast, NNESTs, who have learned English as a second language themselves, are often better equipped to anticipate and address the challenges faced by their students (Medgyes, 2017). This capability can foster a more supportive and empathetic learning environment, which is crucial for maintaining student motivation.

The marketing appeal of NESTs further complicates the issue. Many educational institutions in Asia prioritize hiring NESTs to enhance their reputation and attract more students, rather than focusing on the actual quality of teaching. As noted by Li & Jin (2020), the presence of NESTs is often perceived as a marker of prestige, with students and parents associating native speakers with higher quality education. However, this perception does not always align with reality. While NESTs may bring linguistic authenticity, their teaching effectiveness depends on factors such as cultural adaptability, pedagogical expertise, and their ability to create a positive classroom atmosphere—all of which are not guaranteed by native speaker status alone.

Moreover, the cultural mismatch between NESTs and their students can further hinder motivation. Rao (2010) highlights that in China, the rapid increase in NEST recruitment has not always led to improved learning outcomes. Instead, students often report feeling that NESTs are disconnected from their cultural norms and expectations, which can create a sense of discomfort in the classroom. This cultural gap can exacerbate existing barriers to learning and demotivate students who feel their struggles are not adequately understood or addressed.

In conclusion, while NESTs are often viewed as valuable assets in the EFL context due to their linguistic authenticity and fluency, their presence does not automatically result in positive student attitudes or enhanced motivation. The assumption that native speakers are inherently better teachers overlooks the importance of cultural sensitivity, pedagogical training, and the ability to empathize with students' learning challenges. Recent research underscores the need for a more balanced approach that values the complementary strengths of both NESTs and NNESTs. By fostering collaboration between native and non-native teachers, educational institutions can create a more inclusive and effective language learning environment that prioritizes students' needs over market-driven assumptions.

The Problems Associated with NESTs in the ESL Context

1. Challenges Related to Nests' Understanding of Learners and Their Contexts

Despite the belief that NESTs can help students achieve proficient English communication skills, little evidence exists to support it. It might be caused by the complex factors that can affect the learning results, as [Rao \(2010\)](#) argues that the superiority of linguistic competence of NESTs may not be enough, and motivation, perseverance, or experience factors may also contribute to the results. This statement is supported by [Walkinshaw and Oanh \(2012\)](#) who claim that the lack of knowledge of NESTs on non-linguistic factors, such as knowledge of local cultures and pedagogical systems, may have a negative impact on students' attitudes. The students might also view the non-linguistic factors as outweighing the NESTs' linguistic competence, affecting their motivation to learn English. Meanwhile, [Oroujlou and Vahedi \(2011\)](#) state that learners' attitudes and motivation are the initial factors that affect the efficiency of L2 learning. Thus, rather than improving the students' English communication abilities, the existence of NESTs in EIL teaching in Asian countries would likely lead to some problems that may affect students' attitudes motivation, and the success of the learning.

The first problem of providing NESTs to teach EIL in Asian contexts is that these teachers might not be aware of the student's linguistic problems. [Rao \(2010\)](#) argues that this problem is caused by the ignorance of NESTs of the differences between English and students' first language. He further reveals how Chinese students in his study expect the NESTs to consider these differences and would like the NESTs to compare the English words taught with their first language to make them understand better. This problem is likely can be solved by NNESTs, as stated by [Ma \(2012\)](#), the local English teachers can use the student's first language to explain difficult English words and, thus, help the students to get a better understanding and overcome linguistic problems.

On the other hand, [Ma \(2012\)](#) also highlights that NNESTs' shared first language and language-learning experiences with their students make them more efficient in addressing language-learning difficulties. NNESTs who come from the same cultural and educational background as their students have undergone similar language-learning processes, enabling them to better understand and address students' challenges. Additionally, the ability of NNESTs to use the students' first language is essential in providing an effective teaching process. As mentioned by [Rao \(2010\)](#), the inability of NESTs to speak the students' first language often results in students perceiving them as less empathetic, understandable, and approachable. This perception can negatively influence students' attitudes and motivation, as they may feel that their linguistic challenges are not adequately addressed.

[Chun \(2014\)](#) further emphasizes the importance of addressing linguistic challenges, noting that Korean students perceive NESTs as being less sensitive to their difficulties in learning English. These students often experience misunderstandings and frustration due to their limited English proficiency, while NESTs struggle to address these challenges due to their inability to use Korean. As a result, students tend to prefer NNESTs, who are seen as more effective in helping them navigate language-learning problems and are more attuned to their specific needs. [Sezgin & Önal \(2021\)](#) also note that students find learning easier with NNESTs, who often compare examples and contexts in English with the student's mother tongue.

Furthermore, due to this language understanding problem, the students believe that NESTs are more suitable for teaching advanced-level students, as these students are equipped with enough level of English proficiency to understand and communicate with NESTs ([He & Miller, 2011](#)) This difference in teaching fit suggests that students with low English proficiency may feel less motivated to learn with NESTs, as their teaching methods are perceived as less effective in addressing basic linguistic challenges. This ineffectiveness

may negatively impact students' motivation and attitudes toward English learning, making NNESTs a more appropriate option to meet the needs of these students.

2. *Lack of familiarity with Local Educational Practice*

The second problem of recruiting NESTs to create successful EIL teaching in Asia is that NESTs often struggle to master the specific teaching strategies or methodologies that align with the diverse educational systems in different countries across the region. For example, in China, students feel uncomfortable with NESTs applying a global, one-size-fits-all teaching style that does not take into account their limited English proficiency. As highlighted by Rao (2010), Chinese students expect NESTs to help them understand each sentence in a text and to analyze difficult words, rhetoric, and language structures, rather than simply leaving them to guess or make inferences. The students also feel disappointed with the NESTs' open teaching style, intuitive-random style, and hands-on style, which the students view is not suitable with the curriculum and examination-oriented approach applied in their country. Additionally, students in Vietnam have expressed disappointment with NESTs' open, intuitive, and hands-on teaching approaches, which they find misaligned with the curriculum and examination-oriented focus prevalent in their country (Walkinshaw and Oanh 2012). They state that it is caused by the fact that most NESTs are short-term contracted, which makes them not have enough time to learn the local education system. Thus, it seems that NESTs lack the knowledge of Asian educational contexts and effective teaching methodology, which may affect the attitudes of students and EIL teaching success.

The problem of NESTs' limited teaching knowledge of Asia is further argued by Walkinshaw and Oanh (2012) to be caused by their little knowledge and experience in teaching. Some NESTs are even said to have no teaching skill qualifications or come from non-education backgrounds. Few are even high school graduates without specialization in the subject they are teaching. However, due to the high demand for English teachers in Vietnam, the status of English native speakers is preferred to be employed, even though this problem results in many complaints conveyed by the students. On the other hand, students' perceptions in Chun's (2014) study show that they have positive attitudes toward NNESTs in terms of their preparation for teaching and mastering teaching methodology. He argues that the 'casual' style of NESTs leads to the students' perception that they are unprepared to teach. This easy-going attitude of NESTs is also criticized by their NNESTs colleagues and, again, shows the unawareness of NESTs towards Asian customs. Therefore, having NESTs teach EIL in Asian contexts requires more effort to make them familiar with the differences in teaching methodology and educational system; otherwise, it will influence the success of EIL teaching programs and make students have negative attitudes toward them.

3. *Cultural Differences*

One of the main challenges in employing Native-English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) to teach English as an International Language (EIL) in Asia is their lack of understanding of the local culture. This can affect students' learning, such as difficulty adjusting classroom behavior and providing examples that are relevant to the student's cultural context. As a result, students may develop negative views of NESTs and have difficulty understanding the material being taught.

Rao (2010) found that students in China were surprised by the NESTs' perceived inappropriate behavior when they entered the classroom, which was very different from their experiences with other teachers. In addition, students complained that the examples used by NESTs to explain the material often came from an unfamiliar cultural context, making it difficult for them to grasp the concepts being presented.

This cultural gap affects various aspects of the learning process. Students, for example, may be reluctant to actively participate or ask questions if they feel that the teacher does not understand their culture or is unapproachable. This hinders interaction and limits opportunities for clarification or deeper engagement with the subject matter. Additionally, students who are accustomed to learning methods such as rote memorization or teacher-centered approaches may have difficulty adapting to the more interactive or flexible teaching style of NEST. This mismatch can slow down student comprehension and impact overall learning outcomes.

With a lack of connection to students' cultural backgrounds and learning strategies, NESTs can potentially create a learning environment that feels foreign or uncomfortable. As a result, these barriers not only slow down the process of understanding the material, but can also decrease student motivation and

engagement, ultimately impacting the effectiveness of instruction. As a result, the students' recognition and understanding of the materials become slower. The problem of understanding NESTs' teaching is also found in [Walkinshaw and Oanh's \(2012\)](#) study that the Vietnamese students experience misconception of NESTs' explanation due to the inability of NESTs to understand students' culture and habits. They even feel stressed about having classes with NESTs because of these cultural differences. This problem is not found when the students are having a class with NNESTs since they have a shared culture and know how to behave with each other.

Then, familiarity with Asian culture and context is required in EIL teaching to accelerate students' comprehension and prevent them from having negative attitudes and low motivation to learn English. A part of the cultural and social aspect in the Asian context is the students' unfamiliarity with interacting with foreigners in their daily lives. This problem is also shown in a classroom environment where the students feel anxious to interact with NESTs ([Ma, 2012](#)). She also states that the level of anxiety can be higher due to the few hours students have with NESTs, considering most NESTs are only complementary teachers for teaching oral skills. This situation can be a problem for the teaching and learning process considering the importance of interaction between teachers and students to get mutual and comprehensive understanding.

[Pae \(2017\)](#) also highlights that a high level of anxiety about communicating with NESTs is common among students, despite their strong desire to learn English. This suggests that the cultural gap and the status of NESTs as foreigners create a psychological barrier, making students hesitant to express their enthusiasm for learning. Such anxiety can significantly impact the teaching and learning process by inhibiting active participation, reducing the willingness to ask questions, and limiting overall engagement in class activities.

Over time, this persistent anxiety may lead to demotivation. Students who feel intimidated or misunderstood by their teachers are less likely to actively engage in the learning process, which hinders the development of language skills. Furthermore, the inability of NESTs to understand and adapt to the cultural context of their students can make lessons feel irrelevant or disconnected, further reducing students' interest and motivation. Therefore, the combination of cultural differences, limited interaction, and communication barriers contributes to an environment where students are less likely to achieve optimal learning outcomes.

Debunking Misconceptions: Evaluating the Role of NESTs and NNESTs in EFL Learning

Many students and teachers have unrealistically high expectations of Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs), often believing that NESTs are inherently superior to Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs). This perception is rooted in the assumption that NESTs possess better language proficiency, more authentic pronunciation, and a deeper cultural understanding, which makes them ideal instructors for English learners. However, research has shown that this belief does not necessarily translate into better learning outcomes. Studies by [Chun \(2014\)](#) and [Walkinshaw & Oanh \(2012\)](#) reveal that students often hold NESTs in high regard for their language proficiency, yet this expectation is not always aligned with the student's actual needs, particularly in areas such as grammar and vocabulary, where NNESTs are often more effective due to their structured learning experiences.

The findings of [Levis et al \(2016\)](#) further support this argument, revealing that despite the widespread belief in the superiority of NESTs, no significant differences were found between NESTs and NNESTs in terms of student learning outcomes. This study also highlighted misconceptions among both students and teachers, with some perceiving NNESTs as less confident in teaching. However, classroom observations indicated the opposite, showing that NNESTs were equally capable of creating an effective learning environment. [Levis et al \(2016\)](#) concluded that the teacher's background as a native or non-native speaker did not significantly impact students' abilities, particularly in terms of comprehension. This suggests that the perceived advantage of NESTs in teaching is often a misconception, and that NNESTs can be just as effective in enhancing student learning, especially in addressing specific linguistic challenges.

Moreover, a teacher's status as a Non-Native English-speaking teacher (NNESTs) or a Native English-speaking teacher (NESTs) is not the primary determinant of the effectiveness of pronunciation instruction. Being a native English speaker does not automatically make a NEST more effective, nor do NNESTs automatically become ineffective simply because they are not native speakers. With adequate skills and training, both NESTs and NNESTs have the same ability to teach pronunciation well. Pronunciation instruction—often considered a “privilege” of native speakers—need not be the exclusive domain of those with

native-like pronunciation. This study acknowledges the fact that pronunciation is a critical component of comprehensible speech, which is the goal of almost all language learners. However, successful pronunciation instruction does not depend on the presence of native speakers. Students do not necessarily “imitate” good pronunciation from native speakers, nor do they “imitate” bad pronunciation from non-native speakers. Additionally, non-native teachers have a great advantage in teaching pronunciation. Because they have gone through the process of learning the target language themselves, they understand the challenges and mistakes that students often experience. They also have insight into tricks and strategies that can help students overcome difficulties (Levis et al., 2016).

Furthermore, a study by Al Muabdi (2021) found that students feel more motivated to learn English with NNESTs than with NESTs. The reason is they feel comfortable being able to use their mother tongue, in this case, Arabic, when they have difficulty discussing complex issues in English. In addition, students feel comfortable since they believe they share the same sentiments with NNESTs who also have similar language-learning experiences. The fact that they share the same language also makes them prefer NNESTs over NESTs (Adara, 2018). This may also be due to students believing that NNESTs are more aware of the difficulties and challenges they face in learning English as a foreign language (Alseweed, 2012).

From the aspect of grammar, NNESTs teach grammar more effectively than NESTs (Adara, 2019; Alseweed, 2012). NNESTs (Non-Native English-speaking teachers) are often regarded as having a stronger command of grammar due to their extensive and formal study of the language. As second-language learners themselves, NNESTs typically acquire English through structured instruction that emphasizes explicit grammatical rules, patterns, and exceptions. This approach requires them to analyze and internalize grammar consciously, allowing them to break down complex grammar rules and systematically explain them to others. In contrast, NESTs (Native English-speaking teachers) acquire grammar naturally as part of their first language development. Their understanding of grammar is based on intuition and fluency, often without the need for formal analysis or deep reflection on the rules. While this allows NESTs to use grammar effectively in communication, it can leave them less equipped to articulate the rules or nuances underlying grammatical structures.

Furthermore, NNESTs can draw from their own experiences of learning English as a second language, giving them a unique perspective on the common errors and challenges that learners face. This shared experience enables NNESTs to anticipate and address specific linguistic difficulties more effectively. Al Muabdi (2021) suggests that these strengths make NNESTs particularly well-suited for teaching grammar and other complex aspects of language. In contrast, NESTs, with their natural fluency and authentic pronunciation, are better positioned to teach speaking and listening skills, areas where their strengths in intuitive language use and cultural authenticity are significant assets.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Conclusion

In conclusion, the increasing needs of English teachers in Asian countries do not necessarily require them to prefer hiring NESTs over NNESTs. As elaborated, the status of NESTs does not guarantee the success of EIL teaching in Asian countries; rather, it could affect students’ attitudes and demotivate them to learn English due to the language, methodology, and cultural differences. The inability of NESTs to use students’ first language can prevent them from assisting students’ linguistic problems, and their unfamiliarity with Asian teaching methodology and culture can lead to misunderstanding in the teaching process. Meanwhile, the qualified NNESTs who might have no issues with these problems can be preferable teaching models for the students. Therefore, the effect of NESTs on EFL students in learning English as an international language may not always contribute to the students’ positive attitudes and high motivation.

Suggestions

It is advised that Native-English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) receive training in cultural contexts and local teaching methodologies to better adapt to the needs of students in different educational settings. Similarly, Non-Native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) are encouraged to enhance their teaching practices through professional development opportunities, particularly in areas such as advanced pedagogical techniques and classroom management. In addition, NNESTs are advised to consider a

multilingual approach, incorporating students' first language (L1) where necessary, to address specific linguistic challenges and support comprehension. This approach is based on the understanding that drawing upon students' L1 can help bridge gaps in understanding, particularly in complex or nuanced aspects of language learning.

While this recommendation may seem contradictory in comparison to the challenges discussed regarding NESTs' limited ability to use students' L1, it is important to recognize that NNESTs, as second-language learners themselves, can often utilize their own experience of navigating a foreign language to support students. This perspective can help them better identify and address linguistic difficulties. On the other hand, while NESTs' inability to use L1 may limit their capacity to directly clarify specific language issues, their strength lies in their ability to model authentic language use and pronunciation. Therefore, the context in which L1 use is employed can differ depending on the teacher's background and approach.

Furthermore, institutions are encouraged to prioritize hiring English teachers based on their skills and expertise rather than their native speaker status. However, to make these approach effective, clear criteria should be established for assessing these skills. For instance, the evaluation of teaching proficiency could include measures such as teaching certifications (e.g., TESOL, CELTA), the ability to design and implement effective language-learning strategies, mastery of both language content and teaching methodology, and the teacher's ability to foster student engagement and motivation. Such criteria would ensure that hiring decisions are based on concrete qualifications and demonstrated teaching abilities, rather than on assumptions about the advantages of native-speaker status.

In summary, while the suggestions to enhance the training and collaboration of NESTs and NNESTs are valid, it is essential to clarify how these practices align with the distinct strengths and challenges each group of teachers brings to the classroom. Additionally, hiring criteria should be well-defined and focused on teaching effectiveness and expertise to ensure that the most qualified individuals are chosen for the role.

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