THE IMPACT OF NATIVE VS. NON-NATIVE ENGLISH TEACHERS ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

Ningaraju

Assistant Professor

Dept. of English, Sri Adichunchanagiri First Grade College, Channarayapatna

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the comparative impact of native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) on student outcomes in English language learning. Drawing on current literature and four case-studies from diverse educational contexts, it explores how teacher nativeness correlates with student proficiency gains, attitudes, motivation, classroom dynamics and learning challenges. The paper also investigates which factors mediate any differences—such as teacher proficiency, pedagogical skill, cultural/linguistic match with learners, and institutional context. While traditional assumptions favour NESTs as superior models of pronunciation and authentic language use, recent evidence indicates that NNESTs often offer significant advantages in empathy, understanding of learner difficulties and classroom scaffolding. The paper ends with an analysis of challenges in leveraging both teacher types, proposes strategies for optimizing student outcomes regardless of teacher nativeness, and offers recommendations for educational policy and teacher development.

Keywords: native English-speaking teacher; non-native English-speaking teacher; student outcomes; English language teaching; learner perceptions; teacher proficiency; pedagogy; native-speakerism.

1. INTRODUCTION

The teaching of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) has long been influenced by the assumption that a native speaker of English inherently constitutes the ideal teacher. This assumption—often called *native-speakerism*—posits that native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) are inherently more capable of providing accurate language models, authentic pronunciation, idiomatic usage and cultural richness. As one review notes: "the majority of English language teachers worldwide are non-native English speakers (NNS) … yet no research was conducted on these teachers until recently."

At the same time, non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) bring distinct advantages: they share the first language (L1) of learners, understand the learner's challenge of acquiring English, and often have strong pedagogical awareness of language learning issues. For example, students often perceive NNESTs as more approachable, better at explaining grammar and more empathetic. This dichotomy raises a key question: **Does the nativeness of the teacher significantly affect student outcomes in English language learning?** If so, how, in what ways, under what conditions? This paper aims to explore this question by (1) reviewing the literature, (2) presenting four case-studies drawn from diverse contexts, (3) analyzing the impact on student outcomes (proficiency gains, motivation, confidence, attitudes), (4) identifying key challenges, and (5) proposing solutions and policy implications.

Given the global shortage of highly qualified teachers in many EFL contexts and the increasing employment of NNESTs, clarifying these issues is highly timely for teacher recruitment, training, professional development and educational policy.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Native-Speakerism and Teacher Nativeness

The ideology of native-speakerism refers to the belief that native speakers are inherently superior as language teachers. This ideology has been criticized as simplistic and potentially discriminatory. For example, a study reviewing perceptions in Vietnam and Japan concluded that while students viewed NESTs as models of pronunciation and culture, they found NNESTs to have stronger grammar-teaching ability and more supportive classroom relationships.

2.2 Comparative Studies of NESTs vs NNESTs A number of empirical studies have compared teacher types. For instance:

- An Observational Study on the Effects of Native English-Speaking Teachers and Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers on Students' English Proficiency and Perceptions (Fuangkarn & Rimkeeratikul, 2020) found that both groups significantly improved student English proficiency (Cambridge KET gain scores) in Thailand; interestingly, "the gain score suggested that NNESTs can make a higher gain score than NEST in all grade levels."

- Does being taught by native English-speaking teachers promote improvement in speaking skill more? (Koşar, 2021) found no statistically significant difference between groups in adult EFL learners' speaking outcomes over eight weeks, although some difference emerged in one portfolio.

- A survey of agriculture students in Indonesia found students rated both teacher types well; they believed that when teachers (either NEST or NNEST) were competent and professional, nativeness per se was not the deciding factor.

- A review article by Zhang & Solarz (2022) enumerated advantages and disadvantages of both teacher types: NESTs excel in setting English-only environment, authentic pronunciation, but may struggle explaining grammar and students may perceive them as less approachable; NNESTs may excel in empathy, scaffolding, L1 support, but may face pronunciation/fluency limitations and student prejudice.

 Student Perceptions, Attitudes and Motivation Student perceptions of teacher nativeness matter because they affect motivation, engagement and confidence. For example, NNESTs were found to create more comfortable classroom atmospheres and stronger rapport in some contexts. On the other hand, students tended to prefer NESTs where pronunciation and listening skills were the priority.

Key Mediating Factors

It is increasingly recognized that teacher **proficiency**, **pedagogical skill**, **cultural/linguistic match** with students, **teacher training/experience**, and **institutional context** are more determinative of student outcomes than simple nativeness. For example, Tira Nur Fitria's review emphasised that both NESTs and NNESTs should possess strong linguistic, pedagogical and cultural competence for optimal effectiveness.

3. CASE STUDIES

Here we present four illustrative case-studies drawn from published research and/or simulated based on common contexts. (For a conference presentation, you may choose to collect your own data; these serve as exemplars.).

Case Study 1: Thailand Private School – Fuangkarn & Rimkeeratikul (2020)

- Context: 252 upper-primary students at a private school in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

- Design: Observational mixed-methods; students taught by NESTs and NNESTs over one academic year; assessment using Cambridge KET, classroom observation, student interviews.

- Findings: Both groups achieved significant proficiency gains; surprisingly, NNESTs had higher gain scores than NESTs. Students rated NNESTs more favorably in teaching ability, learning atmosphere; experts rated NESTs higher for English skills.

- Interpretation: In this context NNESTs may have had stronger classroom rapport, better scaffolding; NESTs offered stronger linguistic model but perhaps less alignment with learner background.

Case Study 2: Adult EFL Learners – Koşar (2021)

- Context: Adult EFL learners, 8 week period; experimental group taught more by NESTs versus control primarily by NNESTs.

- Findings: No statistically significant difference between groups in speaking quiz, end-course test, first and second speaking portfolios; only the third portfolio showed statistically significant difference favouring NEST-led group.

- Interpretation: Short-term interventions may show little difference; at higher proficiency levels or in tasks emphasising speaking competence, a native speaker model may yield some benefit—but the effect is modest.

Case Study 3: Indonesian University Students – Wulandari, Fitria & Maryanti (2023)

- Context: Agriculture faculty students at Indonesian university assessing perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs.

- Findings: Students rated both NESTs and NNESTs well. Key suggestion: That when teachers (either type) are competent and professional, nativeness becomes less significant. Students also suggested that NESTs should study/understand the students' native language/culture; NNESTs should improve proficiency via exposure abroad.

- Interpretation: The cultural/linguistic match and teacher development are crucial in shaping effective teaching, regardless of nativeness.

Case Study 4: Literature Review – Masrizal (2013)

- Context: In Indonesia, review article summarising research on NESTs vs NNESTs.

- Findings: The author emphasises that NNESTs have "equal advantages" which should be taken into account, and the assumption that NESTs are inherently better leaves very limited opportunities for NNESTs.

- Interpretation: Highlights that policy and perception issues (prejudice, status) can limit effective teacher utilisation; the teacher recruitment culture often privileges native status over pedagogical competence.

4. IMPACT ON STUDENTS

4.1 Student Proficiency Gains: The case studies suggest that both NESTs and NNESTs can enable significant language proficiency improvements. For example, in the Thai study, NNEST-led groups had slightly higher gains. The adult EFL study showed minimal difference in short term. Thus, teacher nativeness does **not** guarantee better proficiency outcomes; instead, teacher skill, alignment with learners and sustained exposure matter.

4.2 Student Motivation, Confidence and Attitudes : Students often associate NESTs with authenticity—native pronunciation, exposure to culture—which can enhance motivation and confidence. However, NNESTs are often seen as more approachable, able to anticipate learner difficulties, share L1 experience, and scaffold more effectively—thus fostering positive attitudes and engagement. For example:

"Students valued NNESTs for their structured lessons, clear explanations, encouragement, and ability to relate to the challenges of learning English."

4.3 Classroom Dynamics and Engagement : NNESTs may leverage shared linguistic/cultural background to create a more inclusive, comfortable environment wherein students feel safe to make mistakes and ask questions. NESTs may bring a stronger English-only environment, which can be motivating for advanced learners but potentially intimidating for beginners.

4.4 Skill-Specific Impacts : Some research points to certain teacher types being more effective for particular skills:

- NESTs may excel in listening/listening-comprehension, pronunciation/intonation, authentic spoken discourse.

- NNESTs may excel in grammar explanation, translation support, L1–L2 mapping, and scaffolding for lower-level learners.

4.5 Learner Level and Context Effects : The impact of teacher nativeness appears moderated by learner level (beginner vs advanced), institutional context (EFL vs ESL, large class vs small), and type of instruction (intensive vs regular). For example, beginner learners may benefit more from NNESTs who understand their L1 difficulties; more advanced learners may derive greater benefit from NEST exposure.

5. CHALLENGES

5.1 Prejudice and Status Issues : NNESTs often face status-disadvantages based solely on nativeness rather than competence. Stereotypes persist that native speakers are inherently better—this may demotivate competent NNESTs and bias student expectations.

5.2 Teacher Proficiency and Pedagogical Skill : Not all NESTs are trained in language-teaching methodology; some may lack awareness of learners' difficulties. Similarly, NNESTs may have strong methodology but weaker pronunciation or limited cultural exposure. Both groups therefore face skill-gaps. For example, some students in one study found NESTs good at pronunciation but weak at grammar explanation.

5.3 Alignment with Learner Needs: Mismatch between teacher background and learner context can reduce effectiveness. For example, a NEST unfamiliar with local culture or learners' L1 may struggle to scaffold appropriately. Similarly, a NNEST lacking exposure to high-level English usage might limit learners aiming for authentic variety.

5.4 Institutional Constraints: Hiring policies that prioritise "native speaker" status may ignore teacher training, experience or proficiency. Also training opportunities may be lacking,

professional development for NNESTs under-funded. Large class sizes, heavy teaching loads, mixed-level learners also complicate optimal outcomes.

5.5 Pronunciation, Accent and Authenticity : One of the often-cited advantages of NESTs is their "native accent," but this advantage may be less important than intelligibility and clarity. Some NNESTs may have non-native accents but are highly intelligible and good models. However, student perception sometimes undervalues this nuance.

6. SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Focus on Teacher Competence Rather Than Nativeness : Institutions should emphasise teacher **linguistic proficiency**, **pedagogical training**, **cultural/linguistic awareness**, rather than the binary native/non-native distinction. Professional development programmes should be designed accordingly.

6.2 Mixed Teacher Teams and Collaboration : Consider pairing NESTs and NNESTs in co-teaching arrangements: NESTs can provide authentic language input; NNESTs can scaffold, explain, link to L1 and local culture. Such collaboration leverages strengths of both.

6.3 Ongoing Professional Development : – For NESTs: training in EFL pedagogy, understanding local learner difficulties, cultural/linguistic adaptation.– For NNESTs: training in pronunciation/intonation, exposure to authentic English varieties, confidence-building, teacher identity.

Also mentoring and reflective practice facilitate continuous teacher growth.

6.4 Curriculum and Materials Aligned with Context : Materials should respect learner background, provide L1–L2 scaffolding where helpful, incorporate communicative as well as form-focused instruction. Teachers should be trained to adapt materials rather than simply import those designed for different contexts.

6.5 Feedback, Monitoring and Research : Regular assessment of teaching effectiveness (learner outcomes, motivation, retention) should guide teacher deployment. In particular, qualitative feedback from learners about teacher behaviour and classroom dynamics should supplement quantitative test-score data.

6.6 Addressing Perceptions and Equity : Educational leadership should actively challenge the native-speakerism bias. Awareness workshops for staff and students can help shift focus to teacher skill rather than nativeness. Recognise and reward high-quality NNESTs and support their career development.

7. CONCLUSION

The assumption that native English-speaking teachers are inherently superior to non-native speakers is increasingly challenged by empirical research. The evidence shows that both NESTs and NNESTs can deliver positive student outcomes, and in many cases NNESTs achieve comparable—or even better—outcomes when the conditions are right (good pedagogical skill, contextual alignment, strong rapport).

What matters most is not the teacher's nativeness per se, but their **proficiency**, **pedagogical competence**, capacity to **scaffold learners appropriately**, cultural/linguistic awareness, and alignment with the learner's context and level. Schools and institutions should therefore move away from hiring or valorising teachers purely on the basis of native-speaker status, and instead invest in training, collaborative models and equal opportunities for both groups.

For student outcomes in English language learning to be maximised, the optimal approach may well involve **both** teacher types working together, harnessing the strengths of each. Only

by focusing on teacher effectiveness, continuous professional development, and context-sensitive pedagogy can we ensure that learners receive the best possible instruction—regardless of whether their teacher is a native or non-native speaker of English.

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