

Perceiving Native English Speaking Teachers: EFL University Students' Perspectives

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Abstract

To allude to the 'native speaker' concept and investigate the native speaker effects, this research looks into the perceptions of 25 Thai EFL university students towards native English speaking teachers. How native English speaking teachers influence the participants' learning behaviours and motivation to learn English are also perceptually reported. Two research instruments, the survey questionnaire and the semi-structured interview, are employed for this study. The findings indicate overall positive perceptions towards native English speaking teachers, pointing that their classes are mostly fun, interactive and motivating. The flexible and interactive teaching methods and styles used by native English speaking teachers are found to be most favoured, followed by their approachable personality traits and the students' vast opportunity to practice oral and written English. Most participants, if given an option to choose a teacher, have a salient preference to study with native English speaking teachers in which case neither teachers' age nor gender matters. There seems to be a strong relationship between studying with native English speaking teachers and the participants' learning behaviours and motivation to learn English.

Keywords: Perceptions, EFL, University Students, Native English Speaking Teachers, Learning Behaviours

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Introduction

This study examines the perceptions of Thai university students towards native English speaking teachers' EFL classes. Also, an effort is made to find out whether these perceptions have any consequence on the student's learning behaviours to learn English. It also aims to find out the desirable characteristics of native English speaking teachers in English classrooms.

Research shows that students' perceptions towards learning a foreign language are linked to students' behaviors and motivation to learn to speak a second language. According to Brown (2006), a thorough understanding of students' perceptions plays an equal role in improving teaching, students learning and student achievement. Additionally, several scholars in the field of second language acquisition (e.g., Abraham & Vann, 1987; Horwitz, 1999) hold a similar view that learners' perceptions toward language learning as well as teachers can, to a greater or lesser extent, affect their learning approaches. All these views provide a solid and valid ground for exploring learners' perceptions.

English teachers teaching at university level in Thailand represent both native and non-native English speaking teachers from various nationalities. Nevertheless, native English speaking teachers are the main focus in this study context as they interestingly by and large represent 'norms' of nativeness in English language teaching especially in EFL contexts.

Two main research questions in the study are:

1. What are the perceptions of Thai EFL university students towards native English speaking teachers?
2. To what extent do these perceptions reshape the students' learning behaviours and motivation in learning English?

Literature Review

Though perceptions are perceived as personally fabricated, mostly based on individual's previous experiences (Lefton, 1997), social and collaborative phenomena embedded in social activities in which people engage in various everyday situations and settings play an important role in helping to shape individual's views. Covey (1989) notes that the social paradigms and social experiences have an influence on individuals' perceptions when they interact with their family, school, teachers, religious affiliations, and even friends. However, according to Breen (2001), in most cases, the focus of social learning is placed on those who have mastered knowledge and capability and those who are seeking such knowledge or developing such capabilities. This can be applied to the language teaching and learning situation. The well-informed participant is the teacher who is the skilled second language practitioner, and the ones seeking and developing knowledge are the learners who aim to become skilled second language users. On account of this, it is very likely that perceptions are to be formed and reshaped as a result of social experiences and influences. Thus, as this current study revolves around perceptions of students in a particular context, its overall learning context is bound to be different from another context.

Learners' perceptions towards second language acquisition

Perceptions play a critical role in second language learning in that they determine second language learners' learning behavior and motivation (Cotteral, 1995). Learners will be more likely to make

contact with the speakers of the language if they have positive views towards those speakers (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). Stern (1983) reasons that if learners highly value the target language, they are likely to assimilate themselves into that language and learn it well. On the contrary, they will tend to reject learning that language if they take a negative view of it. Ellis (1996) reported that perceptions that each learner holds toward learning English can influence his/her success in English language learning and, accordingly, his/her English language proficiency. Building from these views, it is possible to make a general conclusion that learners' perceptions toward what they learn, among other factors, play a vital role in their learning success.

This present study directs its specific focus to one of the most significant factors that could predispose EFL learners' perceptions towards English learning: native English speaking teachers. In order to better understand the roles of native English speaking teachers in EFL learning, the next section will examine the native speaker construct and how learners' perceptions towards native English speaking teachers can affect their English learning.

Native speaker construct

According to Davies (1991), the construct 'native speaker' has at least three different meanings in theoretical discussion with regards to knowledge and capacity. Firstly, it is used to refer to a speaker of one's own idiolect. Secondly, it refers to a speaker of an uncodified dialect, and thirdly, the construct represents part of a group adhering to a codified norm in a standard language. He further points out that it is possible to be a native speaker of more than one language, even though it is not common.

The characteristics of a native speaker have also been identified by Davies (2003) along with Crystal (1985), and Richards et al. (1985), all of whom suggest the following major points found in the qualities of the native speaker:

- the NS acquires the first language (L1) of which he or she is a native speaker in childhood;
- the NS has intuitions in terms of acceptability and productiveness about his or her own language competence;
- the NS has intuitions about those features which are mutually intelligible by others whom they share the same language with;
- the NS has a specific capacity to produce proficient spontaneous discourse, exhibiting a wide range of communicative competence;
- the NS has a specific capacity to write creatively at all levels of written discourse; and
- the NS has a specific capacity to interpret and translate into the L1 of which s/he is a native speaker.
- the NS shows identification with a language community (This is an additional point mentioned by Johnson and Johnson, 1998)

Apparently, it is debatable that in reality some native speakers are far from fluent in speech. Native speakers are not necessarily aware of their knowledge in a formal sense or only a small percentage of native speakers are characterised with creativity, such as poets or rapsingers. Therefore, these characteristics of a native speaker are variable and not a necessary part of the definition of "native

speaker" since the lack of any one of them would not disqualify a person from being a native speaker (Cook, 1999).

A rather different, challenging viewpoint about a native speaker is proposed by Kramsch (1995). While acknowledging that one has to be recognised as a native speaker by the relevant speech community, it is remarked that being a native speaker is the result of particular education. This idea is confirmed by Widdowson (1994), explaining that a native speaker is someone who speaks the right variety of the native language. In fact, Widdowson affirms that a majority of those who are born to the language speak a non-standard native language and have themselves to be instructed in the standard at school. In this way, native speakers only refer to those who identify themselves with a codified norm in a standard language.

Rather than being objective and affirmative about it, Davies (2003) sees the term "native speaker" as an ideal associated with the myth, while acknowledging that the term serves as a model associated with reality, which deserves consideration. Critically speaking, native speakers differ from one another with regards to accent and syntax as neither do all native speakers have the same accent, nor are they all equally competent in the native language.

Past research on perceptions of students related to native English speaking teachers

There is evidence of research studies on students' perceptions related to native English speaking teachers undertaken in diverse settings. Shimizu (1995) carried out a research survey of learners' attitudes towards native English speaking teachers in Japan where 1,088 Japanese students from eight colleges participated. In the findings, over half the students felt that English classes instructed by native English speaking teachers were stimulating, entertaining. In sum, the results of the survey strongly suggest that native English speaking teachers are valued for personal characteristics such as friendliness.

Moreover, Snodin and Young (2015) conducted a study on native speaker varieties of English: Thai perceptions and attitudes. For this questionnaire-based study, research questions investigated which varieties 251 Thai learners of English thought they were actually using; which they saw as their target model; and also explored their attitudes towards different 'native-speaker' varieties. It was found that such varieties still predominated over alternatives such as 'English as a Lingua Franca', suggesting that most of the participants perceived English used by native English speakers as an exemplary model of standard English.

Methodology

The present study uses a case study approach. The use of the case study as a methodology fits the needs to explore the phenomenon under study where data are drawn from people's experiences and practices and so are seen to be strong in reality. Moreover, not only can case studies provide a data source from which further analysis can be made, but they also can pave the way for further research work. They can be associated with action and their insights contribute to changing practice (Cohen and Manion, 1995).

Sampling

The sample, purposively selected, consisted of 25 Thai university students who majored in Business English with mixed English ability. They studied in the international program where

English was used as a medium of instruction across all courses offered. 20 of them were female while the 5 others were male. Broadly, the selection of participants was based on a number of credits earned. A minimum of 90 credits earned by the participants out of 142 credits required for graduation was a requisite to ensure that the participants experienced learning with native English speaking teachers and could justly reflect on their perceptions towards this group of teachers.

Data collection

In order to gain rich and comprehensive data, two data collection methods were employed: survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

The main source of data in this study is derived from the use of survey questionnaires. Cohen and Manion (1995) mention one of the great advantages of the survey questionnaire—that is, numerous questions can be asked about a subject, giving extensive flexibility in data analysis and a broad range of data can be collected.

Interviews were also used as a supplementary source to the questionnaires to collect additional data, for they provide in-depth qualitative data which can then be analysed using interpretive techniques. A semi-structured interview technique was used. This would allow the respondents to express their feelings and thoughts and be guided and focused at the same time (Mills, 2001).

Data analysis

Because only qualitative data were collected, they were analysed using an interpretive approach. The interpretive analysis methods of ‘topic ordering’ and ‘constructing categories’ suggested by Radnor (2002) were used.

With regard to the analysis of the semi-structured interviews, the 12 interviews were fully transcribed. The interview data were intended to supplement the students’ attitudes expressed in the questionnaire.

Findings and Discussion

To answer the first research question, four major categories were developed. These include who native English speaking teachers are; native English speaking teachers’ teaching methods and styles, native English speaking teachers’ personality and classroom discipline, and native English speaking teachers’ overall perceptions.

It was revealed that most of the participants perceived, as Crystal (1997) purports, native English speaking teachers to be from inner-circle countries (i.e. America, England, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada), in which English is used as a native language.

In terms of teaching methods and styles of native English speaking teachers, more than half of the participants (n=19) pointed out that native English speaking teachers related their methods and styles of teaching more heavily to practice, classroom discussion and activities using

real-life examples, focusing less on grammar and formal writing while promoting English speaking and conversation intuitively.

In addition, 20 respondents reported that in general native English speaking teachers were lenient and understanding and at times encouraging when it came to classroom discipline and personality. Three participants additionally commented that culture had a great effect on the personalities, classroom behaviour and discipline of native English speaking teachers.

Also, the participants were asked about their overall perceptions towards native English speaking teachers. The findings indicated that all participants would enjoy studying with native English speaking teachers, reasoning that studying with native English speaking teachers helped them to better improve their overall English proficiency with a tendency of developing English pronunciation in particular.

The findings in this study seem to be in line with what Palfreyman (1993) suggested in that native English speaking teachers are rather flexible with language forms and meanings. In terms of teaching approaches, native English speaking teachers would emphasise intelligibility, development of ideas, and lively discussion mostly through activities. Thomas (1995) also noted this tendency in his study on native English speaking teachers' traits. For classroom behaviour and discipline, Thomas's study and the present study found similar results: native English speaking teachers are perceived as relaxing and behaving informally in class, and it is quite obvious that this is regarded as a positive quality.

For the second research question, it can be answered as follows:

Students' perceptions of native English speaking teachers towards their learning behaviours

It was revealed that a large number of participants (n=22) perceived that studying with native English speaking teachers influenced their behaviour in class. Many indicated being more comfortable in native English speaking teachers' classrooms, whereas others perceived themselves to be more eager and focused, mainly owing to communication difficulties that existed between them and native English speaking teachers. However, despite the presence of a language barrier, the vast majority of participants held positive impressions of classes taught by native English speaking teachers given their own learning behaviours.

There appeared to be a positive relationship between the students' perceptions towards native English speaking teachers and their learning behaviour in terms of classroom engagement. Most of the students perceived that native English speaking teachers encouraged them to share ideas in class, making them enthusiastic to occupy themselves in both class and group discussion. Kato (1998) found the same result, as native English speaking teachers in her study were seen to inspire students to contribute to the class efficiently. Salahshoura and Hajizadeh (2013) emphasise the importance of teachers in involving and stimulating students to participate in discussion, and see this as one of the desirable attributes of a competent EFL teacher.

Students' perceptions of native English speaking teachers towards their motivation to learn English

In general, most students in the study indicated a positive drive to study English with native English speaking teachers. As the result revealed, their motivation to learn English was to a great extent associated with the value placed on English listening and speaking improvement. It might be the case that listening and speaking would be considered more practical and desirable than reading and writing for the students in this study. Pegrum (2000) suggests that outside the English classroom, listening and speaking are used twice as much as reading and writing. Also, inside the classroom, speaking and listening are the most often employed skills.

Implications for teachers

The findings of this study point out that Thai EFL university students in this study reported holding positive attitudes towards native English speaking teachers. Also, there appeared to be an association between these attitudes towards native English speaking teachers and the students' learning behaviours and motivation in learning English.

Classroom participation

The first implication concerns EFL teacher training in terms of encouraging students to share ideas and giving them opportunities to be involved in classroom discussion. Research studies show that students appear to have fondness for teachers who are good at telling stories, especially those who share real-life anecdotes that are appealing to them (Hadley and Hadley, 1996). Thus, through choosing proper lesson activities and using suitable non-verbal communication to help convey meaningful expressions, EFL teachers are likely to generate more classroom dynamics.

Teaching culture

Many participants indicated that their perceptions towards teachers and their classroom behaviours are predisposed by their own culture. This cultural influence appears to be implicit within the learning context. Thus, the next implication takes into account the explicit teaching of culture. EFL teachers and even learners should be made aware that language and culture are unavoidably linked and as such cannot be detached (Byram and Fleming, 1998; Baker, 2003). Thus, the teaching of culture should be integrated into normal English lessons. Learners need to be encouraged to use English in various contexts rather than with reference to only English speech communities or even their own native culture.

Conclusion

This study explored the perceptions of university students towards native English speaking teachers in the Thai university context. Moreover, an attempt was made to examine how the perceptions held towards native English speaking teachers determined their learning behaviours and motivation to learn English. The findings suggested that the students reported holding positive attitudes towards native English speaking teachers in several aspects. Also, there appeared to be a connection between these perceptions the students had and their learning behaviours and motivation in learning English. It was also found that if the students were able to choose a English teacher to learn English with, most indicated learning with native English speaking teachers, reasoning that studying with these teachers helped to better improve their language proficiency especially pronunciation.

Further research into perceptions of students regarding native and even non-native English speaking teachers in different contexts from a critical perspective can be worthwhile to yield more useful results in this domain of study.

About the Author:

Sureepong Phothongsunan works at the Faculty of Arts, Assumption University. Having a doctorate in TEFL from the University of Exeter, UK. He completed an M.A. in TESL from the University of Central Missouri, U.S.A. He has published books, articles, and research in the fields of Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching.

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