

Exploring EFL Students' Perceptions of Teachers with Native and Non-native English Accents

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Abstract

A growth in the demand for English language teachers led to a greater number of educators from diverse countries. Therefore, this study investigates EFL students' perceptions of native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), with particular attention to how different English accents influence students' learning experiences. Conducted at a Junior High School in Samarinda, Indonesia, the research adopts a qualitative approach using thematic analysis to interpret data obtained through observations and interviews. The study reveals that students are aware of noticeable differences between native and non-native accents, and these differences impact their comprehension and classroom engagement. While native speakers were often perceived as more fluent and authentic in pronunciation, non-native teachers were seen as more relatable and easier to understand due to their shared linguistic background.

Keywords: English Accents, NEST, NNEST, EFL students, Qualitative study.

1. Introduction

The prevalence of English has become a defining characteristic of our globalized world (Schneider, 2014). This surge in English usage is a direct consequence of the intensifying forces of globalization. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, English transcends geographical boundaries, finding new applications and enthusiastic adopters beyond the traditional "Inner Circle" of countries with a long history of English dominance. This phenomenon signifies a significant shift in global communication, where English is increasingly seen as a vital tool for participation in the international arena, from trade and diplomacy to education and scientific research.

As a result, there is a need for more English language teaching in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL). To meet this need, many of non-native English speakers become teachers and teach English to international students both native and non-native (Macaro et al., 2018). This situation builds awareness, where non-native speakers are usually considered incapable of teaching due to their local accents (de Figueiredo, 2011). Sung (2016) in his study found, that exposure to a multitude of students with varying local accents can potentially generate miscommunication and confusion in learning English because every accent is possible to have different word stress and

articulate, which is far from “neutral” English pronunciation. For instance, Indonesia non-native English often giving strong emphasis on the letter /s/ while for native speakers in some words, /s/ is often not voiced. Although some researchers pinpoint comprehensibility as the key objective in L2 teaching however, learn with native accents are more preferable (Levis, 2005) as local accent by non-native socially unacceptable and pose difficulty in speech comprehension (Tokumoto & Shibata, 2011).

Subsequently, the disparity between non-native accents and native accents poses a challenge as accents are recognized as a primary factor contributing to miscommunication. The study held by Weatherhead et al. (2019) reveal that prosody plays a crucial role in exchanging information process. These findings closely align with the importance of pronunciation quality. If a teacher is unable to produce accurate and articulate pronunciation, it subsequently creates challenges for students in comprehending the knowledge. Other study by Kraut & Wulff (2013) also support this with his findings, that Asian speakers were viewed as having stronger accents and being less comprehensible than Hispanic or Middle-Eastern speakers.

Therefore, this study aims to identify answer for the following research question:

1. What are students’ perceptions towards learning English with teachers’ native and non-native accents?

2. Literature Review

According to Garrett (2010) the use of English is influenced by a process of standardization, which establishes norms about what is considered “correct” and “incorrect” language. This standardization forms an underlying English language ideology. Although such ideologies may not always be consciously applied in everyday life, they are systematically introduced through formal education, particularly via textbooks and school curricula developed by the authorities. Additionally, the social stigmatization of different language forms is often taught, promoting the notion that certain varieties, such as minority languages, code-switching practices, and non-standard grammar are less prestigious or “substandard” compared to the established norms.

Accents, which reflect a speaker’s national and cultural background, also play a significant role in shaping social acceptance. Garrett (2010) also notes that the use of particular English accents can influence an individual’s position within social class. Consequently, the same standards that originated in native English-speaking societies continue to affect how EFL speakers are perceived generally. Jenkins (2009) further emphasizes that such standardization pressures are also present within the field of English language teaching. Evidence shows that non-native English accents often receive negative perceptions.

One theoretical framework that offers insights into this phenomenon is the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) proposed by Giles (2016). Individuals tend to adjust various aspects such as accent, volume, body gesture, and word choice of their communication to facilitate mutual understanding.

According to C. Wells (1982), accent refers to how a sentence is pronounced by an individual, encompassing phonetic aspects such as alphabet sounds, rhythms, and prosodic features, which are then processed depending on the speaker’s mental lexicon

and reflect the cultural or social background of the speakers. Accents carry social significance, shaping listener attitudes and triggering stereotypes or biases. The difference between NEST and NNEST' accents can be understood by examining a teacher's pronunciation, rhythm, and overall speech pattern exhibited in the class. Learners may hold unconscious biases, impacting their willingness to understand or accept accented speech. Familiarity with the natural English speech generally improves comprehension, and positive attitudes or openness from listeners can mitigate negative effects.

Inbar-Lourie & Donitsa-Schmidt (2020) found that NESTs generally demonstrate higher levels of spoken fluency compared to NNESTs serve as a powerful motivator, inspiring students to refine their pronunciation ability (noviati, 2018). Students specifically highlighted the pronunciation of NESTs as a benchmark for their English learning goals. In addition, according to Alseweed (2012)), 89% of the students who participated in his study agreed that English classes taught by NESTs felt more relaxed. This perception stemmed from the NESTs' openness to discussion, even on topics unrelated to the lesson, and NESTs tendency to reduce strict language rules.

An ethical pressure resulting from the prestigious status of native English teachers, leading non-native English teachers to adapt native English phonetic pattern (Tajeddin et al., 2018) and emphasize the teaching that closely resemble employed by Native English (Uchida & Sugimoto, 2020).

Despite the common belief, among education specialist, non-native English teachers are considered capable to teach English effectively (Deng et al., 2023) Although having native English skills is important, the ability of a teacher to build a deeper connection with students by sharing cultural experiences is also crucial. In example, if a particular subject matter becomes difficult to explain in English, NNEST can effortlessly switch to local language, as a result, students are generally more comfortable seeking help during lessons, particularly those with lower levels of language proficiency (Ayu Wulandari et al., 2021).

3. Methods

This research applies phenomenology qualitative methodology. The data collected through classroom observations and interview with the participated students. The participants of this study are students in 8th grade junior high school with the following criterias:

1. Currently studying English subject with NEST and NNEST
2. Students with high participation rates in both classes
3. Students with low participation rates in both classes

Participation criteria:

1. Asking the teacher more than three questions during class sessions.
2. Engaging in active conversations or discussions with the teacher
3. Paying close attention to the teacher's explanations during lessons.
4. Completing assigned tasks with seriousness and responsibility.

4. Result

4.1 Student's Perceptions of NEST & NNEST Accent

a. Pronunciation Differences between NEST and NNEST

One of the most notable impressions students get is the variation in pronunciation between Native English Speaker Teachers (NESTs) and Non-Native English Speaker Teachers (NNESTs). Both classroom observation and interview data revealed this differences.

Students often pointed out that NESTs had more natural and flowing pronunciation. Their early and protracted exposure to English as a first language was credited for this. According to one participant,

“Native teachers pronounce words more fluently because they have been speaking English since childhood. Meanwhile, Indonesian teachers still have traces of her first language accent.”

(Apx 1: P1/Pg 87/ L34 & 36)

Another student pointed out the subtle but impactful phonological variation between the two types of teachers:

“Then also the way they (NNEST) repeat the sound like “word” is woRd, it should be word, if for example NNEST pronounced it as word, the R is audible. Whereas if the NEST is teaching, the R can't be heard.”

(Apx 3: P3/Pg 106/L30)

This response draws attention to a significant variation in rhoticity: the non-native teacher's pronunciation stresses the /r/ sound, a characteristic common to Indonesian-accented English; the native speaker (from a non-rhotic variety such as British English) omits it.

Moreover, students demonstrated knowledge of how accent affects intelligibility and involvement. A single participant said:

“Yes, it's quite important, because the speaking style of foreign teachers can differ from that of local teachers. For instance, the accent used by Mr. C is easier to understand.”

(Apx 3: P3/Pg 105/ L10)

This perception aligns with C. Wells (1982) theory on accent variation, which emphasizes that a speaker's first language and geographical background generally influence pronunciation differences, particularly at the phonological level. The influence of Bahasa Indonesia on NNESTs is evident in pronunciation patterns that diverge from native English norms, characterized by reduced vowel length, misplaced syllable stress, and consonant substitution.

b. Clarity and Comprehensibility of NEST's & NNEST's Accent

An outstanding aspect during classroom observations in the Non-Native teacher's class was that almost all students appeared enthusiastic and actively participated in the learning process. Notably, students were highly focused when the non-native teacher explained the material at the front of the class and followed the teacher's instructions well. This aligns with the field notes obtained during the classroom observation, as follows:

“All the students were silent, focus and listen to the explanation, some of them write the material on the book. When asked to repeat, all the students followed along. They oftenly laughing when the teacher explaining with a sense of humor or makes some jokes.”

(Field Note, Session 1; NEST class, 6 February 2025, 13:24)

Student engagement during classroom activities, including during material explanations and the delivery of instructions, demonstrates that the English accent used by the native teacher was clear and understandable to the students. As noted in the observation, students even laughed when the teacher inserted jokes into the lesson.

Although interviews revealed that the students required time to fully understand the teacher’s speech pattern, they showed an awareness of the importance of adapting to the accent and pronunciation of native English speakers. According to a student, the accent employed by NEST was initially challenging to comprehend. It was taken some time for the students to get used to the accent.

“When I first learned with a NEST, I often didn’t understand or got confused. But now that I’m used to it, I find it easier to learn with NEST.”

(ApX 1: P1/Pg 91/L76)

However, students’ perceptions of the accents used by NNEST showed significant variations. Students with higher levels of English competence reported that NNEST accents were relatively easy to understand, due to the use of familiar vocabulary. In contrast, students with lower levels of English competence showed a lack of willingness to participate in English lessons in both class, NEST and NNEST. As supported in the interviews below:

“The accent is different from the non-native teacher and the word choice is a lot different. Like the choice of words is more foreign. Because usually non-native teachers use what we usually know. For example, native teachers use a lot of words that they use from their home country.”

(ApX 2: P2/Pg 101/L26) Highly engaged students

Students with high participation rates, who also high English proficiency, noted that the vocabulary used by the non-native teacher was relatively common and familiar. In contrast, the native teacher introduced a wider range of new and interesting vocabulary, which made the lessons more engaging and enriching. On the other hand, students with low participation rates indicated that they experienced difficulties in understanding the English pronunciation spoken by both NEST and NNEST, as reflected in the following student statement:

“The pronunciation used by both the NEST and NNEST was largely unclear to me”

(ApX 5: P5/Pg 133/L81 & 83) Disengaged students

Based on observations and interviews, it can be concluded that students are sensitive to the differences in accent presented by the two types of teachers: Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) and Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs). Students

expressed that the accent used by NESTs tends to be more fluent and easier to understand, primarily because native teacher have been exposed to English since childhood. In contrast, NNEST often carry noticeable Indonesian pronunciation features when speaking English.

Furthermore, the findings aligned with theory from Munro & Derwing (2001), which states that accent can affect students' comprehension. The students' perceptions related to the understanding of the teachers' accents, it appears to be influenced by students' individual levels of English proficiency. Students with higher English proficiency, such as P1, P2, and P3, generally stated that both native and non-native accents were comprehensible. Some of them even showed a preference for NEST class, as reflected in the higher participations rate during English class by NEST and their strong academic and classroom performance.

Conversely, students with lower English proficiency, such as P4, P5, and P6, reported that the accent used by NEST was rather difficult to understand. Some even expressed that both teachers' accents posed challenges to their comprehension. This also correlated with the low participation levels in both NEST and NNEST classes.

5. Discussion

Based on the research findings regarding students' perceptions towards NEST and NNEST, a number of significant differences were identified. The aspect of word pronunciation was the main difference perceived by students. As stated by C. Wells (1982), non-native English speakers exhibit pronunciation that differs from that of native English speakers. Certain pronunciations by NNESTs tended to produce stronger emphasis on some phonemes, while those by NESTs showed smoother articulation on certain words and no hesitation when speaking (Inbar-Lourie & Donitsa-Schmidt, 2020) This phenomenon is allegedly influenced by first language (Bahasa Indonesia) interference in the pronunciation of NNEST (Bent et al., 2008)

Another interesting finding revealed that students with a lower level of English proficiency tend to have difficulty in understanding the pronunciation of both NNEST and NEST shown by low participation rates in class. This can be attributed to the higher level of language fluency generally exhibited by NESTs compared to NNESTs (Inbar-Lourie & Donitsa-Schmidt, 2020) In contrast, students with a higher level of English proficiency tend to rate the pronunciation of NNEST as easier to understand due to its similarity to pronunciation patterns in their everyday conversations. This is consistent with the findings in a research by Ayu Wulandari et al. (2021) which suggests that NNEST teachers have the ability to adapt aspects of local culture, including pronunciation and teaching style, thus facilitating students' understanding of the material presented.

6. Conclusion

Students' perceptions of the accents used by NESTs and NNESTs, it was found that participated students generally agreed that NEST and NNEST exhibited distinct accents, influenced by each teacher's native language. Students' responses varied in terms of their ability to understand these accents. Those with higher levels of English proficiency reported

greater ease in understanding and learning from NEST, while students with lower proficiency levels experienced difficulties in English classes with both NEST and NNEST.

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