

Non-Native Speaker Teachers of English: What Students Expect and Ideas to Contribute as a Role Model

Eriko Mishima
Chubu University

Key words: Native Speaker Teacher, Non-Native Speaker Teacher,
Role Model, Motivation

THE DISCUSSION OF ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES IN HAVING A non-native speaker (NNS) English teacher has been carried out for years as one of the popular issues among English learners in Japan, as there is still a belief that native speakers (NS) are more reliable source or favourable educators of the language in English language teaching industry in East and Southeast Asia. (Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014) Now that the necessity of learning English from one's childhood is growing drastically because of the government's new emphasis on early-childhood education of a foreign language in Japan, we should give serious consideration to the roles of non-native English teachers and its functions since the vast majority of English teachers are non-native speakers, especially at primary and secondary schools.

Even at college level, typically, NS teachers and NNS teachers are expected to work on different types of English language classes; we, as NNSs, are often assigned to teach “*grammar*” and “*test-preparation*” classes which do not usually require students nor teachers much “*communicative*” skills of English. Although these classes are important and necessary for general language development, they could be very uninspiring for young learners who want to be able to “speak” English. In previous researches on students' perceptions of ESL teachers, Mahboob (2004) found that a considerable number of students who enrolled in an intensive English course in the United

States felt NNS teachers were not the best teachers of oral skills, while they generally valued NNS teachers for the ability of identifying the problems with the learners' pronunciation. Also, Berke and Medgyes (2005)'s study of Hungarian learners of English showed that some viewed the differences in linguistic and cultural background of NNS teachers sometimes inhibited their language learning. Although many participants of both studies appreciated other teaching elements of NNS teachers', there was some degree of expectations for "native-speaker-ness" among learners and authorities; such as being able to offer authentic pronunciation and possessing adequate cultural knowledge.

Considering this perspective, it might be reasonable to think that NNS teachers shouldn't be in charge of classes which include "*speaking*" or "*oral communication*" components. But, in fact, are NNS teachers really not good enough to teach some types of language elements? If so, what could they do to best utilize the "*non-native-ness*" in the assigned classes within the context with limited resources in Japan?

Methodology and Materials

In this essay, I, as a NNS teacher of English, focused on trying to understand the general attitudes of university students towards NS and NNS teachers of English and their classes through a short survey involving free comment sections. Also, while discussing the results, I would like to introduce and share some of the ideas in classes to enhance the contribution to the field as a NNS teacher.

The participants are 60 students of Chubu University, and all of them are majoring in English. Most of them are in their third year of English learning program at the time the survey was conducted, and they have had both NS and NNS teachers throughout their study of over two years. Also, almost all participants have experience studying abroad at least for a few weeks within the first two years.

The survey is constructed of three simple questions:

1. Which teacher do you prefer to have in an English class: Native Speaker or Japanese?

2. What is your favourite content in an English class?
3. What motivates you the most when you study in an English class?

The participants responded to these questions with multiple choices, then wrote a brief description to each answer. The directions and all 3 questions were all written and responded to in Japanese, so English proficiency level of each participant is not a considered issue to the subject matter.

Results and Finding

The outcome of the answer to each question is presented below, and the students' free comments are discussed and summarized to analyze the attitudes. Figure 1 shows the proportion of the result to the first question; "*Which teacher do you prefer to have in an English class?*". The majority of the students displayed "*no-preference*", while 18 percent of them chose NS teacher over Japanese (NNS teacher).

Figure 1. Native vs. Japanese (N = 60)

Among the 11 participants who preferred NS teacher, 5 of them commented about "*pronunciation*"; they believe that they need to have a NS teacher to learn native-like,

authentic pronunciation of English, which supports one of the major perspectives of English learners from previous researches. Also, one student mentioned the reliability of the language use, while another student wrote that she likes the active way of teaching which NS teachers often offer. On the other hand, 2 out of 5 participants who chose Japanese(NNS) teacher described that sharing the same 1st language is very helpful when they have trouble understanding some elements of the new language; and another 2 wrote that a Japanese teacher often acknowledges learners' struggles and gives good advice as a person who have been through the same process learning the language.

In fact, although the majority of the students expressed “*no-preference*”, it seems that they also have the similar opinions to those who chose one over the other; such as “*authentic pronunciation*” for NS, and “*clear-explanation with the 1st language*” and “*understanding nature*” for NNS teachers. In addition, 4 of them specifically mentioned that they prefer a Japanese teacher when they study for “*grammar*” or “*exam preparation classes*”, but not for “*conversational skills*”, even though they didn't show their general preference clearly. That is to say, most of them are in fact aware of the benefits of learning from variety of teachers for different elements and purposes. However, among these students' opinions, a very noticeable expectation of the students toward NNS teachers is observed. 10 students, which consists of over 22 percent of them, expressed that they expect Japanese teachers to have a very high language and cultural competence of English. Here are some of their opinions translated into English:

“It doesn't matter what teacher I have if he/she has the ability of speaking native-level English.”,

“Learning from both types of teachers is important, and if a Japanese teacher speaks fluent English, I feel like learning a lot from him/her.”

“I don't mind having a Japanese teacher of English if he/she has enough experience being in an English speaking country.”

Very often, the participants indicated the positive opinions toward NNS teachers with this particular condition; “*if their English is good enough*”. In other words, students indirectly

hold the preferable attitude toward a teacher who is a NS or a NNS with “native-like” English proficiency and cultural background.

For the 2 other questions, the outcome of the participants’ answers is presented with a bar graph in Figure 2 and 3. To answer both questions, they were given 5 different choices and asked to put them in the order of their preference or how relevant it is to themselves. They gave the highest score (=5) on the choice they support the best, and the lowest score (=1) on one which they do not like or is not relevant.

There are 5 answer choices for the 2nd question, “*what is your favorite content in an English class?*”: “*Reading/Writing*”, “*Listening/Speaking*”, “*Test Training*”, “*Doing Project*”, and “*Communicative Activities*”. These were chosen because they are the elements which they usually have in classes through the program of their department. The proportion of the result, displayed in Figure 2, clearly shows that students who are majoring in English often enjoy active components of learning English, such as “*Communicative Activities*” and “*Listening/Speaking*”, while passive elements like “*Test Training*” is not at all as popular. As it was mentioned above, the most well-received contents are typically taken charge by a NS teacher, and NNS teachers could face some struggle motivating students in “*reading*” or “*test-preparation*” classes which do not usually contain students’ favorite components.

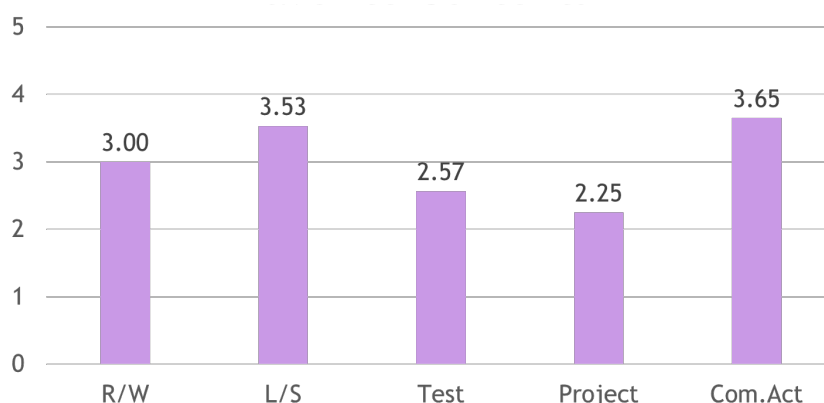


Figure 2. Favorite consents

So, if the contents actually influence the students' motivation, how about the teachers? As a matter of fact, 6 participants commented that "*personality*" of a teacher could affect their attitude more than his/her "*nationality*", on the 1st question. 2 out of those 6 additionally wrote that they would try hard in class if their teacher is helpful and friendly. By looking at the result of the 3rd question; "*what motivates you the most when you study in an English class?*", it can definitely be said that teachers actually have considerable amount of responsibility on how much the students are willing to learn in class. Among the given alternatives; "*Contents of the class*", "*Environment*", including class time and classroom conditions, "*Teacher*", "*Classmates*", and their "*Future goal*", "*Teacher*" is one of the greatest motivation factors of the participants, which is presented in Figure 3. Some participants described specific opinions toward the connection between the teacher and their learning motivation in the comment section; here are some of them translated into English:

"I came to like English because of a teacher I had before."

"Although I am interested in the content, I can't enjoy it if I don't like the teacher."

"It is the teacher that changes if I like the class itself or not."

The results indeed tell that for the students' language learning, the way a teacher instructs and interacts with students is as important as the fact that a teacher has to have the competence and fluency of the language.

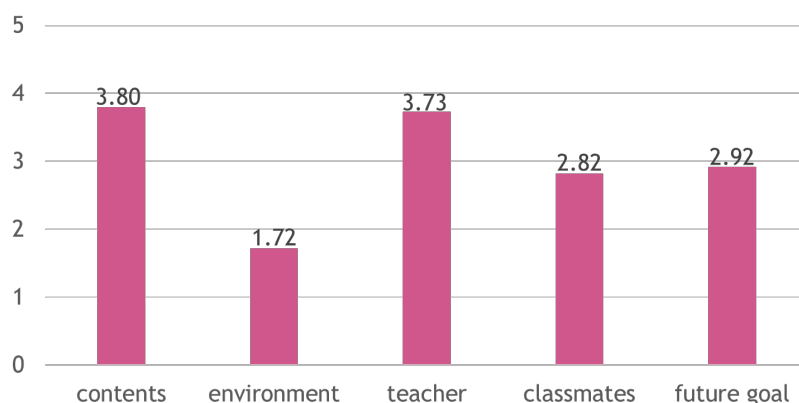


Figure 3. Motivation Factors

Discussion and Ideas

Through this casual survey, the general attitudes of the subjects towards NS and NNS teachers of English and their classes were displayed, as well as the factors affecting their motivation to learn English.

First of all, it is clear that the most students who are majoring English do not usually concern themselves too much with the fact that if the teacher is a NS or NNS. They in fact realize that the strength of each types of teachers and expect to learn different things from both of them. Therefore, as a NNS teacher of English, we should be an expert of what we are assigned to teach to meet the students' expectations. NNSs are never be able to become a NS, but it's definitely possible to become an expert of the grammar or some qualification tests for certain classes. However, this doesn't suggest that a NNS teacher can only be good at teaching those classes which require less communicative components. As it is found from the survey, students' motivation can be influenced by the contents of the class, so we could try to include more communicative activities and speaking practices, which are students' favorite elements, in any class. For example, role-play exercises using the listening materials from the test, such as TOEIC® and Eiken®, can make students more actively learn the frequently appeared expressions and questions. They can create an original conversation and questions for it and perform it as it appears in the actual test. By making a test-like script for the performance, they have to know the format of the

conversation, so naturally they read many sample scripts. Also, performing in front of other students requires certain amount of practice and collaboration with teammates, so they can't just sit and listen to teachers, as they are typically used to in Japanese teachers' classes. We NNS teachers with the expert knowledge of the tests can give a great deal of support for students doing this activity and motivate them to try hard by incorporating "*Communicative*" elements into "Test Training". This could be a great advantage of a NNS teacher, who usually have to deal with less popular language classes.

Secondly, as the survey results indicated, many students expect Japanese teachers to be a fluent speaker of English, besides that they are aware of that "*sharing the same 1st language*" is a positive factor of having Japanese teachers. So, in addition to being an expert of some qualification tests, we NNS teachers should be a role-model for the students as a person who became able to use English at quite high level. To do that, we need to be confident and should not avoid speaking English in front of the students even if it is not perfect. Students would love to see that NNS teachers can actually use English at certain level, and once they get to know the fact that we became bilingual through our hard work, their level of motivation to learn from us might get improved. Also, by sharing stories of how we study the language and the struggles we have faced to become a fluent speaker, we can surely excite and inspire the learners; which is the gift the only NNS teachers can provide. Even in Japanese context with some non-favorable perspectives toward NNS teachers of English, they could definitely take advantage of these qualities of "*non-native-ness*".

Conclusion

In this essay, it was found that this group of students generally hold positive attitude towards both NS and NNS teachers, which is overall supporting several other studies conducted in similar EFL contexts (Ling & Braine, 2007; Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014). In addition, the apparent expectations of the students found in the survey could be a considerable guide for a better lesson planning and curriculum creations. However, the result has a limitation for applying to some other settings because it was only carried out

to the students who were majoring in English. This specific group of participants was very accustomed to learn from both types of teachers, and their relatively high English proficiency level could be one major factor affecting their decisions. So, the research over this issue should be into more variety of subjects; especially in Japan, it could be beneficial to find out the attitude of the primary and secondary school students who do not often have opportunities to have different kinds of teachers. This essay only offers some ideas for better understanding of particular students' attitudes to certain elements of language learning, but hopefully, some of the findings could be helpful for future investigation on this matter.

REFERENCES

- Benke, E., & Medgyes, P. (2005). Differences in teaching behavior between native and nonnative speaker teachers: As seen by the learners. In E. Llurda (Ed.), *Nonnative language teachers: Perceptions, challenges and contributions to the profession* (pp. 195–215). New York: Springer.
- Ling, C.Y., & Braine, G. (2007). The attitudes of university student towards non-native speakers English teachers in Hong Kong. *RELC Journal*, 38, 257–277.
- Mahboob, A. (2004). *Native or non-native: What do the students think?*. In L. D. Kamhi-Stein (Ed.), *Learning and Teaching from Experience*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Walkinshaw, I., & Oanh, D. H. (2014). Native and Non-Native English Language Teachers: Student Perceptions in Vietnam and Japan. *SAGE Open*, 4, 1–9.

About the Author

Eriko Mishima is an English teacher at Chubu University. She received her M. Ed. (in Cultural Studies) from Ohio University. Eriko has over 10 years of experience in English language teaching within various educational settings, and throughout her career, she has been very enthusiastic about creating beneficial activities and applying dramatic methods to increase students' motivation to learn and speak English. The ideas introduced in this article is one example of such practice.

Email: e_mishima@isc.chubu.ac.jp