Views of Thai University Students on Effective Teachers of English: Local or Foreign?

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Abstract

The objective for this research was to study the perceptions of Thai university students regarding their earlier experiences in learning English from native speakers of English (foreign) as well as from Thai teachers. The research question was whether there were any discernible differences between their experiences learning English from local Thai or from foreign teachers. Using a random sampling method, the sample of this on-line exploratory research was 205 students from private universities in Bangkok which employed both Thai and foreign teachers of English. The useable questionnaires were returned via Google forms. The results showed considerable respect for both native-speakers as well as Thai teachers of English. However, accent was the dominant factor which differentiated the two types of teachers; interestingly, there was no mention of foreign teachers having accents which were difficult to understand. Overall, the students had definite positive opinions about their experiences in learning English with both types of teachers. The findings from the open-ended responses showed that the majority of the respondents were generally positive about their English learning experiences.

Key words: ***V****irtual Academic Communities, Local (Non-Native) Teachers, Native-Speakers (Foreign) Of English*

1. Introduction

Undertaking a research project in the middle of a pandemic can be challenging to say the least. However, it is not impossible. In such circumstances, academics must work in virtual communities. Face-to-face interviews are no longer wise - and, in many cases, impossible. This present project sought to ask Thai university students about their previous experiences in learning English. The survey instrument allowed them to differentiate between their teachers who were native speakers and those who were not

Thailand's education system regards the teaching of English as an important part of the national curriculum. This means that school officers have the difficult task of recruiting qualified teachers. However, two of the concerns are availability and cost. Scarcity of teachers of English, particularly native speakers of English, constitutes a major problem (Noom-ura, 2013), not just in these COVID19 times. Then there is the matter of budget. In order to attract non-Thai teachers, salaries and working conditions need to be competitive. Simply stated, non-Thai teachers are fewer in number and they cost more.

The parents of children attending both government and international schools in Thailand can be quite outspoken about who should teach English to their son or daughter. According to many reports, they insist that the teacher must be foreign (Ross, 2013). This fact places both a supply as well as a financial burden on Thai schools.

What if it could be shown that non-native teachers of English are effective teachers of English? Would Thai parents be persuaded? Would they be pleased if their children's teacher of English was a qualified Thai teacher? In this regard, it was necessary to find answers to these questions.

This present study explores, in an indirect manner, the rather sensitive matter of comparing the experiences of Thai students learning English from native English speakers with learning English from Thai speakers of English.

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Related Research

The majority of Thai students spend a lot of time learning English - almost 12 years in primary and secondary schools. Yet, their scores on English proficiency tests rank among the lowest, 116 out of 163 countries, according to Noom-ura (2013). The author pointed out that the teachers of Thai students were non-native speakers of English, their first language being Thai. It is not surprising then that only 3% of primary school teachers had a reasonable level of fluency in English, and only 20% were teaching classes for which they were qualified. 65% had not taken English as their major.

In the case of secondary school teachers of English, only 70% had graduated with a bachelor's degree in English. However, English majors do not choose to become teachers. Rather, they prefer to enter programmes that prepare them for higher salaried-jobs, such flight attendants or those leading to jobs in the hotel and tourism industries or in private and international companies (Dalton, 2020). Those facts are only part of the explanation for low achievement levels on tests of English. Teachers in Thailand have large classes of 25-30 students in both primary and secondary levels and are required to perform many other tasks associated with 'Quality Assurance', for example. In addition, rote learning is common.

While this matter of the separation of teachers of English into two groups has many implications for the teachers themselves, both professionally and personally, the question of effectiveness of teaching English is an even more important.

Numerous studies have emphasized teachers' personal characteristics such as patience, enthusiasm, interest in the success of their students, sense of humour, confidence, cooperation with colleagues, and having a caring personality (Abzobiani, 2020). However, teachers need a set of special skills in order to achieve better outcomes for their students. Effective teachers of English are conscious of the fact that their students need to learn more than reading, writing, and speaking if they are to become competent in using English outside of the classroom. However, many studies of effectiveness in teaching English did not distinguish between native speakers of English and non-native speakers (Carrera, 2020; Photongsunan, 2016)

It is obvious that employers of teachers should carefully consider who to hire: native speakers or non-native speakers. Some points for consideration are as follows:

- Qualified native English speakers in countries like Thailand are scarce, and hiring them is typically more costly.
- Is having an English accent in a global world so important anymore?
- Given the fact that the main English speaking countries are themselves made up of multi-lingual people, what exactly is a native English accent?

The evidence presented thus far would suggest that native English speaking teachers should be hired for their pedagogical skills and professionalism, 'rather than for a language they unwittingly picked up as children' (Kiezkowiak, 2017).

2. Objectives

The research objective for the present online study was to study the perceptions of Thai university students regarding their earlier experiences in learning English from native speakers of English (foreigners) as well as from Thai teachers. Are there discernible differences in students' previous experiences?

3. Materials and Methods

To channel the students' responses, the students were asked questions which were based on certain assumptions concerning effective teaching of English as a second language. The review of the literature concerning what specialists consider to be effective teaching of English in an ESL setting yielded these six qualities:

- Effective teachers are dedicated to the development of English skills for all of their students;
- Effective teachers provide a nurturing and positive climate in their classrooms;
- Effective teachers provide instructional materials, including audio-visual aids, both in terms of their quality as well as their suitability for the level of ability of their students;

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- Effective teachers carry out evaluations of their students' progress in learning English in a timely fashion;
- Effective teachers care about the success of every student by demonstrating fairness and ethical behaviour favouring no one over another; and
- Effective teachers aim to measure progress of their students based on established international standards.

Wichadee (2010) proposed four categories: 1) English language proficiency, 2) pedagogical knowledge, 3) organisation and communication skills, and 4) socio-affective skills. The author concluded that 'effective teachers need to have a wide range of skills and abilities that lead to creating a learning environment where all students feel comfortable and ensure that they can succeed both academically and personally. An effective teacher is not characterized merely by the factors of knowledge or teaching skills, but also communication skills and the relationships the teacher has with students'.

Research Design

The mixed method of quantitative and qualitative research was employed in this exploratory research. Online questionnaire was designed and distributed via Google forms.

Research population, Sample, and Time Frame

This on-line exploratory research sought the views of Thai university-level students about their previous English learning experiences in their high schools and at universities. Using a random sampling method, the heads of English departments in private universities in Bangkok which employed both Thai and foreign teachers of English, were contacted by email. They were asked to distribute the online questionnaire to their students by email (universities in Thailand were closed due to COVID19 pandemic).

Some 205 useable questionnaires were returned via Google forms. The students were currently enrolled in English courses during the summer semester of the 2021 academic year. They had been studying English with both native and non-native speakers of English in their high schools and at universities.

Validity

The questionnaire was sent to five experts in the English teaching field to check the congruence between the research questions and research objectives. Index-Objective Congruence (IOC) was used to evaluate questionnaire items based on a range of scores from -1 to +1 (Incongruent = -1, Questionable = 0, Congruent = +1). A formula for calculating the IOC index was adopted from Rovinelli and Hambleton (1977). According to this formula, the result of IOC was 0.83 while the accepted value should be between 0.67 and 1.0, so all questions for this instrument were acceptable.

Reliability

The questionnaire contained 5-point Likert scale close-ended questions. In order to examine their reliability, a try-out was conducted with a trial group of similar qualification of the target participants. The researchers adopted Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha and the computer program SPSS to calculate it. According to the description of internal consistency of Cronbach's Alpha, a score of 0.7 or higher is acceptable (Taber, 2018). According to the results of the try-out, α=0.85, the instrument used in this study had high reliability which means that all questions were reliable in this study.

Data Collection

An online Google Forms questionnaire was designed to be 'friendly', recognising that, because of the COVID19 pandemic, there would be no face-to-face classroom teachers to provide guidance should students have questions. Also, by using a Likert-five-rating scale and yes-no boxes, it was easy for students to share their opinions and experiences. The link to the online Google Forms questionnaire was emailed to the students with a request that their replies could be returned before the semester ended in September 2021.

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Research Instrument: Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of two forms with identical questions - one form asked about students' experiences in learning English with native teachers, and the other asked about their experiences with non-native teachers. The questionnaire was modelled after ones used in similar studies carried out in Hong Kong and in Singapore.

The first section of each form had five demographic-type questions. Students were not required to state their names. Section 2 of each form asked about the respondents' previous experiences with their teachers of English (15 questions). There were four types of questions related to English language proficiency, pedagogical skills, organisational and communication skills, and socio-affective skills. There was no limitation on time. Students could take as much time as they needed prior to returning the questionnaires by email.

The introduction to the questionnaire attempted to clarify the difference between native and non-native teachers: "native teachers of English may have come from countries where the main language was English while non-native teachers of English are Thai and who have become specialists in the teaching of English as a second language".

Data Analysis

Mean, standard deviation (S.D.), and percentages were used for analysing the data collected from online Google Forms. Students' responses were transferred into Excel sheets first and then into SPSS for data analysing procedures.

The interpretation of the scores on Experiences Learning English was based on the answers the students chose using a Likert-type scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree (Ab Latif et al., 2017): the description of the scales is 4.51 - 5.00 = Highest, 3.51 - 4.50= High, 2.51 - 3.50 =Medium, 1.51 - 2.50= Low, and 0.00 – 1.50= Lowest.

For the open-ended question 'What is a good reason for studying English with a native speaker?', a count was made to compare the number of responses were received on each of the two questionnaires - the form which focused on native-speakers and the form which focused on Thai teachers of English. An analysis was undertaken with respect to such factors as positive versus negative experiences, and the number of students whose opinions matched commonly held beliefs.

4. Results and Discussion

205 respondents answered both forms (native teachers and non-native teachers of English). This implies that they had had both types of teachers. The findings with respect to students' experiences learning English from native teachers of English are as follows.

Table 1 showed demographic data with the percentages of students who responded to the on-line questionnaire. Demographic data were: Females 54.50%, Males = 45.50%; aged 18-20 years old = 68.30%, 21-23 years old = 28.70% and 24 years old or higher = 3%. Length of time studying English for 5 years or more = 77.20%, less than 5 years = 22.80%. Location of studies: Bangkok region = 44.60%, out of Bangkok = 55.40%. More female students reported having had Thai teachers of English than male students; more male students had foreign teachers. The majority of the respondents were in the 21-23 years of age category. The majority of the participants had 5 or more years of previous English studies in centres outside of Bangkok.

Table 1 Demographic data of the Respondents

Part I. Item	**Native Teachers of English (101 respondents)**	**Thai Teachers of English (104 respondents)**
Gender	%	%
Female	54.50	68.30
Male	45.50	31.70
Age	%	%

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Part I. Item	Native Teachers of English (101 respondents)	Thai Teachers of English (104 respondents)
18 - 20	28.70	73.30
21 - 23	68.30	19.80
23 and higher	3	6.90
Years of Studying English	%	%
Less than 5 years	22.80	15.80
5 years or more	77.20	84.20
High schools Location	%	%
In Bangkok region	44.6%	37.60
Out of Bangkok	55.40	62.40

Table 2 Students' Agreement Level on Four Categories of Native and Thai Teachers of English

Part II.	Native Teachers of English (101 respondents)			Thai Teachers of English (104 respondents)		
Item	Agreement Level			Agreement Level		
	Mean	SD	Level	Mean	SD	Level
Category A: English language proficiency Skills						
The teacher spoke and wrote English very well.	4.06	0.89	Agree	4.20	0.76	Agree
Category B: Pedagogical Skills						
The teacher taught English vocabulary and grammar clearly with lots of easy-to-understand examples.	3.97	0.96	Agree	4.13	0.82	Agree
The teacher created and maintained a classroom atmosphere that made the time in class interesting and pleasant.	3.77	1.16	Agree	4.20	0.75	Agree
Questions		*Yes*	*No*		*Yes*	*No*
Was the teacher courteous and polite?		94.1%	5.9%		97%	3%
Was the teacher professional in appearance?		92.1%	7.9%		97%	3%
Category C: Organisation/Communication Skills						
The teacher encouraged communication through activities and discussion.	4.09	0.91	Agree	4.25	0.75	Agree
Questions		*Yes*	*No*		*Yes*	*No*
Was the teacher well organised?		91.1%	8.9%		96%	4%
Category D: Socio-affective Skills						
The teacher used various materials including video, audio, and multimedia.	4.04	0.91	Agree	4.19	0.86	Agree
The teacher developed our English language skills through working in pairs or small groups.	4.09	0.96	Agree	4.12	0.75	Agree
Questions		Yes	No		Yes	No
Did the teacher embarrass students by criticizing them in the class when they made mistakes?		45.5%	54.5%		40.6%	59.4%
Did the teacher praise students for good ideas or when		91.1	8.9		95%	5%

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Part II.	Native Teachers of English (101 respondents)			Thai Teachers of English (104 respondents)		
Item	Agreement Level			Agreement Level		
	Mean	SD	Level	Mean	SD	Level
they improved their English skills?						
Did your teacher arrange for your class to take any practice (international) tests of English? IELTS or TOEFL, for example.		33.7	66.3		33.7	66.3

	IELTS	TOEFL	IELTS & TOEFL	Others	IELTS	TOEFL	TOEIC	Others
If yes, please state the name of the test(s) and your score(s) if you can remember and don't mind.	4 (6&7.5)	2	1	2	2	1	2 (620)	4

*$p < .05$

Table 2 showed students' agreement level on native teachers of English and on Thai teachers of English and students' opinions about their earlier experiences in studying English are as follows.

Category A: Teachers' English language proficiency. The data in Table 2 showed clearly that Thai students of English found that both native and Thai teachers 'spoke and wrote English very well' with high scores (Mean=4.06, SD= 0.89; Mean=4.20, SD= 0.76, respectively).

Category B: Pedagogical Skills. The data also showed that both native and Thai teachers had equally strong pedagogical skills on two of the four attributes. They 'taught English vocabulary and grammar clearly with lots of easy-to-understand examples (Mean=3.97, SD= 0.96; Mean 4.13, SD= 0.82, respectively), and they 'created and maintained a classroom atmosphere that made the time in class interesting and pleasant' with the high scores of agreement level (Mean=3.77, SD=1.16; Mean 4.20, SD= 0.75, respectively).

The teacher's classroom manners are important to learners as well. Being 'courteous and polite', particularly in Thai culture (Nguyen, 2019; Ma et al., 2019). Some students were found to be less satisfied with their experiences; almost 6% reported dissatisfaction with their native-speakers of English, compared to 3% with non-native (Thai) teachers.

Another culturally-based sensitivity is 'professional in appearance'. 7.9% of the students were not impressed with their native speaking English teachers, compared to only 3.0% of those with the appearance of their Thai teachers'. This, too, may be explained by the culture. Thai people have very high expectations for the teachers of their children. This is evidenced by the Code of Conduct which applies to all teachers as promulgated by the Teachers' Council of Thailand (Teachers Council of Thailand, 2005).

From **Category C: Organisation/Communication skill**, the first of the two attributes is 'the teacher encouraged communication through activities and discussion'. The respondents had positive experiences with both native-speakers and with non-native speakers with the high scores of agreement level (Mean=4.09, SD=0.91; Mean=4.25, SD=0.75, respectively).

However, on the matter of how well were their teachers organised, nearly 9% were less satisfied with their native-speaker teachers, as compared to only 4% of students with respect to their Thai teachers. Several previous research findings confirm the authenticity of these opinions (Kurniawati & Rizki, 2018; Apairach & Vibulphol, 2015).

With respect to two of the five attributes, 'encouraging communication through activities and discussion' and, 'being well organised', there was strong agreement that both native and non-native teachers of English displayed uniformly strong skills.

According to the findings in **Category D: Socio-affective Skills**, the first of the two attributes is 'the teacher encouraged communication through activities and discussion', the participating students had positive experiences with both native-speakers and with non-native speakers with the high scores of

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agreement level (Mean=4.09, SD=0.96; Mean=4.12, SD=0.75, respectively). With respect to second of the two attributes, 'the teacher developed our English language skills through working in pairs or small groups', the participating students had positive experiences with both native-speakers and with non-native speakers with the high scores of agreement level (Mean=4.04, SD=0.91; Mean=4.19, SD=0.86, respectively).

However, with respect to 'did the teacher embarrass students by criticizing them in the class when they made mistakes', the results revealed that 45.5% of native speakers compared to some 40.6 % non-native (Thai) teachers did do so. With respect to 'did the teacher praise students for good ideas or when they improved their English skills'', more Thai teachers than native-speakers did so: 95% compared to 91.1%. With respect to gaining experience in writing international tests of English, the experience of students with both types of teachers was the same. 63% of the students had the opportunity to gain experience in writing various types of International English tests.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the students had definite opinions about their experiences learning English with both types of teachers. In analysing the open-ended responses, the majority of the respondents were generally positive about their experiences. No students commented on a well-known fact that some native speakers of English (foreign) possess accents which are not easily understood by other speakers of English. For example, teachers of English from certain areas of England, Scotland or Australia have accents which cannot be easily understood by other English speakers.

One possible conclusion for this may be that the students who participated in this on-line research project were among those whose teachers did not possess strong *regional* accents.

Nonetheless, the Thai students who participated in this online research project were quite clear about accents of teachers of English. Accents were high on their list of concerns. Thus, it would seem wise on the part of teacher selection committees, to take time to check on the accent of applicants for teacher-of-English positions. To insist on passports from the United Kingdom or from Australia, for example, will not screen out those who have strong regional accents. Nor are a teacher's qualifications from one of Thailand's top universities enough either. On-line or in-person interviews, hence, are really important.

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