

TEFL Students' Perceptions of Native and Non-Native EFL School Teachers and University Lecturers: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The idea that non-native English-speaking educators are less competent than their native English-speaking counterparts when teaching language is propagated by the language ideology known as native-speakerism. The dichotomy between these two teacher groups has been addressed in various parts of the world but not in the Armenian context. This study investigates graduate students' perceptions of native/non-native EFL school teachers and faculty at an English medium university in Armenia. Collected Data shows that native and non-native educators were both viewed as meeting students' needs and providing helpful instruction. While preferences for natives were mainly in pronunciation and vocabulary, non-native lecturers, specifically local Armenians, were favored in affective areas. However, a novel finding in this investigation was the confusion over the native speaker term. The study concludes by recommending some academic implementations to offer these in- and pre-service teachers a more nuanced knowledge of the constructs involved.

1. Introduction

In many regions worldwide, the English language teaching profession has perpetuated the belief that native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) are the ideal and sole judges of spoken and written language, whereas non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) are inadequate role models and instructors (Butler, 2007; Kiczakowski, 2020; Kramsch, 1997). Until now, most research on the native speaker ideology has been conducted in the US (Filho, 2002; Mahboob, 2003), and in Asian and European countries (Aksiutina & Vovkodav, 2021; He & Zhang, 2010; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002; Park, 2009; Rondonuwu et al., 2022; Thien et al., 2018; Wu & Ke, 2009 & Wulandari et al., 2021), very few were done in the Caucasian region, and none in Armenia.

Since the demand for English language education in Armenia is growing and native-speakerism is a destructive linguistic ideology carried around by and through English language teaching (Holliday, 2006), this study aims to address the neglected areas of the literature. It examines university students' perceptions of both EFL school teachers from previous experiences and Teaching-English-as-a-foreign-language (TEFL) lecturers from present experiences to gauge

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the extent to which these students are influenced by the ideology. Through a case study based on surveys and interviews, this investigation is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do TEFL students perceive native and non-native EFL school teachers and TEFL lecturers in terms of language areas and teaching style?
2. What do their perceptions reveal about how entrenched native-speakerism ideology is among the participants?

This paper starts by providing an overview of the definitions of the term “native speaker” (NS) and an account of the implications of the NS ideology. The second part reports on previous research on students' perceptions of NESTs/NNESTs and subsequently presents the methodological framework of the study, the discussion of results, and the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Defining the Native Speaker (NS)

Definitions of the NS abound in the literature (Chomsky, 1965; 1981; Cook 1999; Davies, 1991; Kramsch, 1997; Kubota & Amin, 2004; Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Lee, 2005; Maum, 2002; Medgyes, 1992; Suarez, 2000). They were advanced not only from a linguistic point of view, but also from geographic and socio-cultural perspectives.

Some of the earliest definitions of the NS emerged in linguistics through Chomsky (1985). Chomsky was interested in child language acquisition and believed that a NS is born with an innate knowledge of their L1 grammar, which he later theorized as UG (universal grammar). He maintained that a NS effortlessly acquires their L1 and recognizes and produces grammatically correct sentences without explicit instruction. However, he made a distinction between NSs who speak only their first language and those who learn their L2 later in life, by holding that a monolingual individual who speaks only a first language is the ideal NS. To him, this monolingual NS is set apart from others who learn additional languages because it is an individual who uses the “pure” form of language without blending it with other languages, such as what multilingual L2 or LX users do.

Scholars such as Lee (2005), Kubota (2004), Maum (2002), and Medgyes (1992) later added a social dimension and the concept of accent to the earlier definition. Like Chomsky, these scholars claimed that a NS learned a language in early childhood, has an intuitive understanding of it, producing fluent and spontaneous discourse. They also emphasized that a NS of a language is able to manipulate language in a variety of social contexts with no detectable foreign accent (Lee, 2005; Kubota, 2004; Maum, 2002; Medgyes, 1992). According to Cook (1999), however, manipulating a language in different social settings and the absence of a foreign accent are only variable characteristics rather than parts of an absolute definition of a NS. Cook argued that many non-native speakers (NNSs) with some language proficiency can also share these characteristics attributed to NSs. These individuals referred to as “pseudo-native speakers” (p.15) by Medgyes (2021) with their native-like pronunciation can use the language effectively in a variety of social contexts and can be only distinguished from natives when exclusively inspected by knowledgeable NS observers, as they may even be more proficient than natives in some areas.

Other scholars sought to define the term NS from a geographic perspective. For example, Suarez (2000) contended that the term “native” refers to a person's place of birth or upbringing. According to Suarez, a NS is an individual who speaks the language of their country of birth. On the other hand, Kachru (1985) categorized English speakers worldwide into *inner*, *outer*, and *expanding circles*. Based on his model, NSs are those born and raised in inner circle

countries where English is the primary language used daily and in all areas such as the US, The UK, Australia, Ireland, Canada, and New Zealand.

To this geographic definition, academics like Florence Ma (2012) and Holliday (2005) added the notion of physical appearance. As a country of origin is often connected to how individuals look, if speakers are white in complexion, look Anglo-Saxon, and speak a standardized accent, they are more likely to be perceived as NSs than those who do not look Caucasian or speak what is not recognized as an inner circle variety (Florence Ma, 2012; Holliday, 2005). From a socio-cultural perspective, Kramsch (1997) and Piller (2001) argue that a NS is someone who has also been accepted by the native-speaking community, regardless of birthplace. In other words, fluency and linguistic aptitude alone are not sufficient; one must also be acknowledged as a NS by the relevant speech community.

Despite this proliferation of definitions, the practice of trying to define the NS has been criticized by many scholars. According to Davies (1991) and Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999), the term NS does not have a proper or fixed meaning; especially in contexts such as Singapore where child bilingualism is a common phenomenon (Tay, 1981). Children in Singapore are born into families speaking at least two languages at home and therefore cannot identify as NSs of just one national language. Also, because of the recent spread of the internet and media, in many countries around the world, English, if not made the official language, is gradually becoming as significant as the native language as more people use it to communicate with others from different cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. In European countries like the Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark, people start learning English in their early years while also retaining their national language and culture. These individuals' cultural and linguistic affiliation with English is an issue (Aksiutina & Vovkodav, 2021) because they were not born in English-speaking countries or have native parents from English-speaking countries. Yet, they learned and spoke the language from their early years and did so very fluently.

Another problem with these definitions, specifically the one based on people's geographical location, is revealed in "mobility situations" connected with immigrants (Davies, 1991, p. 36), when individuals move from one speech community to another. For instance, when non-English-speaking families come to live in the US or UK, Canada, Australia, or any inner circle country, they send their children to schools so they can speak English fluently. The question arises whether these children, who become fluent in English but whose parents do not speak English as their L1, are NSs of English. In addition to immigrants, this geographic perspective on the NS definition disqualifies other individuals born in predominantly English-speaking countries but no longer reside there, such as expatriates or people born into mixed families with one American parent and another Indian or Asian or another ethnic origin. Thus, based on the literature, it can be quite challenging to define the term NS, let alone distinguish between NSs and NNSs. Nonetheless, the labels "native" and "non-native," will still be used in this thesis for lack of more appropriate alternatives, and because they are still often used in literature.

2.2. The Native Speaker Ideology (Native-Speakerism)

Historically, the term ideology was negatively identified as "defective consciousness" (Platt & Williams, 2002, p. 331) or an upside-down view of the world (Holborow, 2006). This meant that ideologies adopted by a society were viewed as flawed worldviews or conceptualizations, not necessarily logical or scientifically validated as true or reliable. Nowadays, ideologies are predominantly understood as belief systems or ideas "socially shared by the members of a collectivity" (van Dijk, 2006, p.116), which implies that members of social groups within communities, such as linguistic communities, develop common perspectives that are typically held in relation to other groups within the same community. For example, when English

learners as a distinct social group within the English-speaking community hold shared beliefs about another group within the same community such as NESTs and NNESTs. According to Van Dijk (2006), these common perspectives are formed over a long period of time through several experiences and discourses, they are fundamental and can shape the social and attitudinal behavior of specific social groups around these topics. Along similar lines, Seargeant (2009) mentions that language ideologies represent systems of “entrenched beliefs about aspects of the lived experience which structure one's relationship to that experience” (p. 27). By “entrenched beliefs,” Seargeant means that language ideologies represent ways in which people think about language and its uses. They are not simply individual opinions or preferences, but rather deeply ingrained ideas that are often shared by an entire community or society. These beliefs can shape how people use language, what they consider to be correct or appropriate language use, and how they view others who use language differently.

The native speaker ideology, or native-speakerism, is a dominant language ideology in ELT (English language teaching). It positions NESTs as the sole representatives of “the Western culture,” from which supposedly flow both the values of the English language and English Language teaching methods (Holliday, 2006). It is characterized by the belief that the native-speaking West are the legitimate owners of the values connected to the English language and therefore are the only true representatives of it. No one else can teach or represent the language and the culture as genuinely and successfully as they do.

Native-speakerism is also tightly connected to *monolingualism* (Kachru, 1994; Selvi, 2014; Slaughter & Cross, 2020; Tavares, 2022), which is a condition where a language and its speaker are pure and separate, free from “contamination” by interlinguistic interaction (Krulatz et al., 2017). This linguistic separation, highlighted by Lowe and Pinner (2016), promotes assumptions of authenticity and authority through student views, self-perceptions, and professional discrimination, which is at the heart of the native-speakerism ideology. In this regard, NSs are considered the final authority on the English language, and NNSs as borrowers of this authority and the English spoken by NSs is viewed as more authentic than the one spoken by NNSs.

Native-speakerism has a profound impact on how instructors are perceived by hiring recruiters, resulting in job discrimination and a contentious professional debate (Holliday, 2006), negatively affecting the careers of language teaching professionals worldwide (Berger, 2014; Houghton & Rivers, 2013; Lippi-Green, R., 2012; Mahboob, 2010; Medgyes, 2001). Instances of native-speakerism can be seen in recruitment procedures in different parts of the world with school administrators and college institutions showing a preference for NESTs in their programs (Daoud & Kasztalska, 2022; Kiczkowiak, 2020; Mahboob, 2010; Wang & Fang, 2020). In such cases, the ideal candidate in job postings is portrayed as a young, white, energetic NEST from a steady list of inner-circle countries. Such discriminatory practice influences the professional well-being of NNESTs as they continually struggle to ward off the NS supremacy in co-teaching environments and are consequently plagued by fear of losing their rightful standing as English teachers (Hwang & Yim, 2019). According to a study by Kiczkowiak (2020), although teaching experience, qualifications, and performance were viewed as significant factors, almost half of the 21 ELT recruiters interviewed regarded the NS criterion as necessary. Despite the support for NSs being relatively lower than in prior research, which suggests that the NS criteria in recruiting has been somewhat eroding, the study pointed out that the great value placed on language ability and accent, may still disadvantage NNESTs who do not have the pronunciation of a perceived NS.

In addition to discriminatory hiring practices, native-speakerism influences NNESTs psychologically, causing increased anxiety and feelings of inadequacy as they constantly

compare themselves to NESTs in the workplace (Hwang & Yim, 2019; Medgyes, 1999; Rajagopalan, 2005; Takahashi, 2014; Tezgiden-Cakcak, 2019). Fearing the prejudice of their students who, influenced by the ideology, might think that NESTs are better than them, they strive to reach the symbolic capital their NS cohorts have in the class. Such emotional conditions can negatively shape NNESTs' identities and lead to discouragement, underachievement, and distress.

2.3. Students' Perceptions and Preferences of NESTs and NNESTs in Previous Research

The literature behind students' perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs reveals a wide spectrum of partiality ranging from strict adherence to NS norms to a growing awareness about the different realities of the English language use in multicultural contexts. Many studies showed that NESTs were preferred in specific language skills, including pronunciation, speaking, listening, and cultural communication. These preferences were based on the NS's frequent use and good command of idiomatic English, their accuracy in pronunciation, fluency, and extensive information about the Western culture (Aksiutina & Vovkodav, 2021; Elomarabi, 2018; Filho, 2002; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002; Mahboob, 2004; Park, 2009; Thien et al., 2018; Torres, 2004; Wang & Fang, 2020; Wulandari et al., 2021). In Korea, Park (2009) explored the perceptions and preferences of 177 university students toward NESTs and NNESTs. The results indicated no overall bias for NESTs over NNESTs. However, a preference for NESTs appeared in the specific areas of pronunciation, cultural provision, and speaking as students confessed that a NEST meets their expectations of exposure to idiomatic and colloquial expressions in oral language. Similarly, at a university in the U.S., a qualitative study exploring ESL students' perceptions of their N and NN English instructors, Filho (2002) reported that the 16 survey respondents had no overall preference for NESTs over NNESTs. Nonetheless, during the follow-up interviews, the same students showed a predisposition for NESTs concerning teaching specific skills such as pronunciation, oral communication, and cultural knowledge.

While a huge body of studies showed that NESTs were most favored for their oral traits including pronunciation, rhythm, and accent, as well as their extensive knowledge of the Western culture, NNESTs were perceived as better at teaching other aspects of the language, such as grammar and, in some cases, reading, vocabulary, and writing. NNESTs were praised for their so-called "integrated language ability" (Wang & Fang, 2020, p.8), which is their ability to swing back and forth in their use of L1 and L2, and for providing an environment conducive to learning by exhibiting a more "serious attitude to class work" (Alseweed, 2012, p.42). Additionally, bringing in a variety of background experiences to meet the students' needs in terms of teaching strategies, learning styles, answering questions more effectively, anticipating challenges, and dealing with them sympathetically were the strengths students reported particularly about NNESTs (Alseweed, 2012; Elomarabi, 2018; Filho, 2002; Park, 2009; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002; Mahboob, 2004; Wang & Fang, 2020; Wulandari et al., 2021). In a study at Qassim University in Saudi Arabia (Alseweed, 2012), most EFL, male undergraduates deemed NESTs authentic, living examples of their culture. At the same time, these students were aware of the advantages of NNESTs, such as their greater sensitivity to the student's native language and learning preferences. In Mahboob's (2004) research, NNESTs were complimented for their capacity to spot pronunciation flaws in students and teach them how to fix them. Having gone through the process of learning English themselves, students perceived them as more sympathetic and cognizant of their difficulties. They were also reported to be good at teaching grammar, reading, writing, and even listening.

Literature also shows that educational level impacted the students' perceptions as they favored NNESTs at lower levels and claimed that a NEST would be more beneficial at higher levels of education. Such results were initially found in Lasagabaster and Sierra's (2002) research and were reiterated in later studies such as Alseweed (2012) and Elomarabi (2018). Lasagabaster and Sierra (2002) looked at university students' perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs in Spain at different educational levels regarding distinct language areas. Using a Likert scale administered to 76 undergraduate students of English studies and other fields, the researchers found differences in preference for NESTs or NNESTs, as usual, based on specific language skill areas. In productive skills like speaking, writing, and pronunciation, learners favored NESTs. Whereas, in the teaching of grammar, the same students leaned toward NNESTs. However, one interesting finding in this study was that preference for NESTs increased as educational level rose in all specialisms, especially in those taking English studies.

At this point, it is worth noting that in some studies, students occasionally showed a neutral attitude toward NESTs and NNESTs and a complete nonchalance toward pronunciation and standard NS accents. In China, for instance, the 1030 participants (820 non-English majors studying in English and 210 English teachers at the tertiary level) that He & Zhang (2010) surveyed believed that since English is only a communication tool, they could speak it with a Chinese accent. They had a strong sense of language identification and wanted to be recognized as Chinese English speakers.

Recent research shows that students' preferences and views of NESTs and NNESTs have become even more uniformly dispersed over time as more studies raise awareness about the problem of native-speakerism. For instance, a recent survey of 126 students from the Department of Biology at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Education in Vietnam found that more people enjoyed learning biology with NNESTs than with NESTs due to their experience and ability to transfer knowledge. However, some preferred learning with both holding that a combination of both would compensate for their respective weaknesses and strengths (Thien et al., 2018). The same findings were confirmed by another research (Elomarabi, 2018), where most of EFL students from 7 Sudanese universities preferred to have both NESTs and NNESTs as English language teachers because they claimed that a competent teacher who knows good teaching techniques can motivate and encourage students to learn regardless of their nativeness. These results concurred with those of studies by Filho (2002), Liu and Zhang (2007), Park (2009), and (Rondonuwu et al., 2022).

While students are adjusting their views on NESTs and NNESTs in certain areas of the world, a more recent study conducted by Aksjutina and Vovkodav in 2021 in Ukraine suggests that may not be the case everywhere. In this study. Although NNESTs were viewed as successful in using creative approaches and providing clearer explanations, NESTs were complemented for their native pronunciation by EFL students specializing in German, French, Ukrainian philology, and International Relations. So, the existing literature indicates that student attitudes towards NESTs vary, with some acknowledging the diversity in teaching experiences between NESTs and NNESTs, while others still emphasize the English proficiency of NESTs, reflecting a certain extent of ongoing native-speakerism.

3. Method and Participants

Since language ideologies are based on context-sensitive experiences (DeCosta, 2011; Seargeant, 2009; Van Dijk, 2006), they are best investigated through a case study which as Stake (2005) mentioned, focuses on "experiential knowledge" of the case (Stake, 2005, p.444) and pays attention to its social, political, and other environmental impact factors. By focusing on experiential knowledge, this case study unravels rich and in-depth information about what

kind of past and present experiences are behind students' current ideologies and perceptions. Additionally, a careful examination of the existing literature shows that a mixed methods approach is the most suitable for exploring language ideologies and students' perceptions. As (Dörnyei, 2007) notes it can provide a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of a complex issue, compared to using only one research method. It allows corroborating findings through triangulation of data (Paltridge & Phakiti, 2015) from multiple sources (surveys and interviews) to provide a full picture of the topic under scrutiny. Therefore, this paper uses the mixed methods approach as most studies investigating students' perceptions of NESTs/ NNESTs employed this design to look at the same phenomenon from various angles (Aksiutina & Vovkodav, 2021; Alseweed, 2012; Elomarabi, 2018; He & Zhang, 2010; Kiczkowiak, 2017; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002; Park, 2009; Thien et al., 2018; Torres, 2004; Wang & Fang, 2020; Wu & Ke, 2009; Wulandari et al., 2021; Yang, 2011).

Participants of this study are female first and second-year graduate students majoring in TEFL. They studied English for a duration ranging from 2 to more than 20 years. Their ages varied between 18 and older than 40 and their teaching experiences are between zero and more than 15 years of teaching. Among them, 4 in-service teachers are repats, and the rest (18 teachers) are local pre-and in-service teachers seeking professional development. Given that most participants are both students in this course and teachers in their teaching careers, it was intriguing to observe how their opinions on N and NN instructors from the perspective of both teacher and student converged. Participants' experiences were considered in the context of this specific university because it is an institution recognized for its multilingual and multicultural faculty and student population. Hence, it was more likely for them to have encountered or studied with a NS than in other higher education institutions where the language of instruction is Armenian.

In this study surveys and interviews were used for data collection. The survey was in English, containing items curated and adapted from various sources (Aksiutina & Vovkodav, 2021; Alseweed, 2012; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002; Rondonuwu et al., 2022). Since an appropriate TOEFL or IELTS score is required for admission to the university, students' level of English is rather good and there was no need for any translation. The second instrument was individual semi-structured online zoom interviews lasting about 30 to 40 minutes each. The interview questions in this research were arranged and adapted from several similar studies investigating students' perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs to suit the research context and participants (Elomarabi, 2018; Filho, 2002; Torres, 2004; Wang & Fang, 2020).

Data from the survey was collected during the spring semester of 2023, it was exported from the Google Form to an excel document and SPSS IBM data editor was used for analysis. Students' general preferences were analyzed using descriptive statistics to calculate frequencies and percentages and mean scores were derived using the responses from the Likert scale items (1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-neutral, 4-agree, 5-strongly agree) for each question. Regarding the interview data, a content analysis approach was used to identify the most salient and recurring themes that emerged from the students' discourse during interviews. The themes were then systematically coded, synthesized, and linked to survey responses. An oral and written consent from all participants was collected during the process of data collection.

4. Findings and Discussion

In this part, results are categorized into two sections. Section one provides valuable insights into the ideological beliefs of students through their views of N/NN educators from their past school years, as well as current experiences at the university. Section two unveils a challenge in identifying the native status of the students' current university instructors.

4.1. Students' Perceptions and Preferences of N/NN EFL School Teachers and University Lecturers

Results regarding linguistic abilities indicate that pronunciation, vocabulary, and idiomatic language were the main considerations that TEFL students preferred N over NN educators. Survey data shows that while some respondents believed both instructors could help, the majority expressed confidence that their pronunciation would undergo greater enhancement with the guidance of a NS educator.

My pronunciation would be better with...

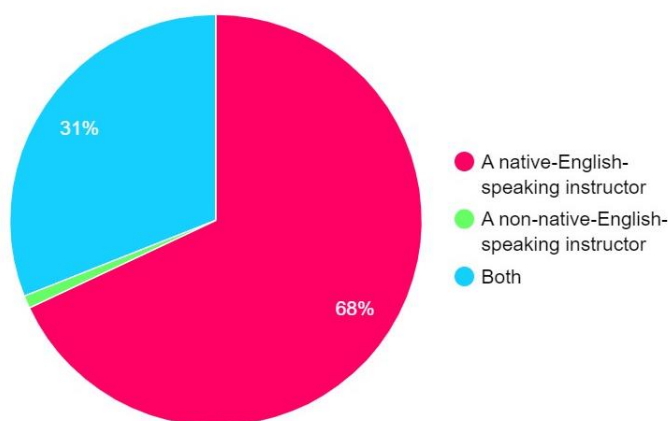


Figure 1. Perceptions of Students of N/NN teachers/instructors in Pronunciation
 Note. Total N=22

The same outcome was reflected in interviews as one student said, “I think that sometimes the NS, um, you know, um... compared to non- native teachers would be, uh, very much helpful because, as I said, it would help in terms of the pronunciation.” Despite the word “sometimes” in her response which suggests she recognizes that having a NS instructor is not always necessary for improving an entire learning experience, her use of “compared to” and “very much helpful” indicates that she perceives the NS’s natural sounding spontaneous speech more beneficial in comparison. Another student highlighted the importance of exposure to NSs in developing correct pronunciation. She said, “I didn't get here all by myself. I communicated with NSs for three years. That's why my English improved...if I want to learn a language, I really want to pronounce words correctly.” Although participants did not explicitly state that NS instructors were their ideal models of perfect pronunciation, their responses highlighted two major themes related to native-speakerism ideology: the belief that exposure to NSs is crucial to develop correct pronunciation, and superiority of NSs when judged against NNSs in linguistic standards. This finding aligns with the outcome of many previous studies which reported that NESTs are often perceived as being role models for natural speech and authentic pronunciation (Aksiutina & Vovkodav, 2021; Elomarabi, 2018; Filho, 2002; Mahboob, 2004; Park, 2009; Thien et al., 2018; Torres, 2004; Wang & Fang, 2020; Wulandari et al., 2021; Yang, 2011).

However, students with such beliefs, especially the ones who wish to speak English flawlessly and with standard pronunciation, must know that although studying from a NEST might be useful, it is not the only option to improve pronunciation. Individual differences, exposure to resources like audio and video recordings, and language learning experience are just a few of the multiple variables that might affect pronunciation. NNESTs who are well-versed in the phonetic structure of the language can also provide valuable assistance because they may be more aware of the challenges that students have while learning the language. Additionally,

technologies like voice recognition software and AI chatbots may provide students with feedback to improve their pronunciation.

A recurring pattern of preference for NESTs was also revealed in terms of teaching idiomatic and colloquial expressions. 45% of the students thought that both instructors could be helpful, but 50% were convinced that they would improve their vocabulary and learn more idioms with NS instructors revealing a slight bias towards NESTs and a nuanced belief in their superiority in this linguistic aspect. This finding offers a collective representation of outcomes from several empirical studies in different contexts in the literature (Mahboob, 2004; Park, 2009; Wang & Fang, 2020; Wulandari et al., 2021). Results from Mahboob's (2004) study analyzing essays written by 37 adult students enrolled in an intensive English ESL program on a topic related to NESTs and NNESTs showed that students considered both teachers good at improving their vocabulary. At the same time, in other studies on students' perceptions (Park, 2009; Wang & Fang, 2020; Wulandari et al., 2021), NESTs were favored over NNESTs for having a better knowledge of idiomatic and colloquial expressions. Such preferences indicate that students perceive NESTs as having cultural and linguistic authority when it comes to teaching idiomatic and colloquial expressions. They believe that NESTs represent the authentic and standard form of the language. However, it is important to remind them that language learning is not a linear process. There are various other factors that can help with the retention of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions. For example, textbooks, online courses, and language learning apps often provide comprehensive vocabulary lists with explanations and examples of idiomatic expressions. Additionally, immersing oneself in the language through activities like watching movies, listening to music, reading books, interacting with a diverse group of language enthusiasts, or engaging with proficient non-native speakers can also be valuable. Self-study and focused practice are also effective methods for improving retention and utilizing these skills.

For reading, writing, listening, grammar, and speaking, 86.4% of students interviewed believed that both NESTs and NNESTs were good options to help them improve in these areas. Yet, the results are inconsistent with traditional claims made in some previous studies (Elomarabi, 2018; Filho, 2002; Park, 2009; Walkinshaw and Oanh, 2014) where students' preferences of NESTs and NNESTs were distributed differently based on the types of skills taught. NESTs were almost always favored in teaching speaking and listening due to their much-appreciated pronunciation and accent, and NNESTs were only preferred for grammar classes because having studied the language themselves, they were thought to have a more subtle understanding of the language's grammatical intricacies and could explain them better. In this study, however, the different language areas including writing, reading, grammar, listening, and speaking did not dictate an exclusive preference for one instructor over another. Participants perceived both N/NN instructors equally valuable since whoever teaches the skill is not as important as how the skill or language aspect is being taught, the ability to make things clearer and more accessible to students was paramount. Here, the focus on teaching methodology rather than the native or non-native status of the instructor challenges all traditional claims associated with native-speakerism, emphasizing effective learning experiences over rigid NS preferences.

In essence, pedagogical competence was a recurring theme in TEFL students' responses. In the survey, 95.5 % reported both N/NN instructors adapted innovative teaching techniques to create an interesting environment conducive to learning regardless of their native status. This finding represents a combination of results derived from various empirical studies on EFL learners in the literature (Aksiutina & Vovkodav, 2021; Alseweed's, 2012; Reves & Medgyes's, 1994). Previous studies indicated that, in some cases, NNESTs were perceived to use more innovative teaching approaches and materials; in others, NESTs were preferred because of their ground-breaking teaching techniques that fostered better learning outcomes. For example, in

Alseweed's (2012) and Reves and Medgyes's (1994) studies, participants believed that NESTs used more creative teaching methods in the class than NNESTs. In contrast, in Aksiutina and Vovkodav's (2021) study on perceptions of philology majoring students in Ukraine, students confessed that they liked NNESTs because they used more innovative strategies and explained things better. In this study, one student said the best language instructor regardless of who they are, could “explain, like some complicated concepts from the course book in a way that it would make sense.” Along the same lines, another student lauded the teaching expertise of a language instructor, attributing her positive learning experience to the instructor’s use of creative and varied resources to motivate the students:

That is how my English language learning started. Cause um, what [NNEST] did was not just, you know, books and, uh, learning by heart stuff. [NNEST] would provide multiple, um, resources, or learning, like, um, be visuals, be uh, songs, be, uh, games. [NNEST] would even create them. (1st year student)

Several other participants mentioned instructors' ability to transfer knowledge as an essential condition for a positive learning experience. One student said, “Because you may have a very high proficiency level in a language, but not have the ability of presenting it... You don't have the techniques of, uh, like sharing that knowledge with the students.” Another second-year student reported that what is important in a language class is:

Transfer [knowledge] or teach what, what you already know to a bunch of people who do not have any idea about the subject. And the ability to understand, uh, from where to start, what to give them. This is not all about teacher. Yes. You might have a lot of know knowledge, but do not have the ability to teach it. (2nd year student)

These quotes collectively demonstrate that despite caring for instructors’ pronunciation and fluency, TEFL students believe that effective teaching goes beyond being native or having extensive knowledge. Their perspectives here challenge the assumption that NSs inherently possess better teaching abilities simply due to their language proficiency. In addition to teaching ability, character traits were deemed to be as important. Qualities such as a positive attitude, interaction, good student rapport, kindness, patience, care, and compassion were repeatedly mentioned. One interviewee highlighted that personalized attention to students was the element that made some NN instructors stand out:

Yes. The [NN instructor] invested time and gave us individual attention. That's what's different between, uh, [NN1] and, and, uh, [NN 2]. They're both non-natives. They're both Armenian. But why we always like raise the flag for [NN 2], because [NN 2] was different in their attitude, interaction, the time that they spent to prepare, right? (2nd year student)

Referring to a NNEST from her school years whose positive and caring attitude motivated her to work hard, another second-year student explained:

If I, uh, think of all the English teachers I had, I have had, I can tell about, I think about [NNEST] because, uh, it's not only the language that [NNEST] native or not native. This is more connected with [the] attitude, that this [NNEST] is seeking results and is not indifferent. That the results are important for [NNEST]. (2nd year student)

Yet another TEFL student mentioned that the qualities of kindness and compassion in a native American teacher had a lasting impression on her in a language class, she said:

So, um, I remember one American teacher, an instructor in the US at university. And, um, [NEST] was, again, very compassionate, uh, very much, um, conscious of the student. And, uh, not only him, I also remember my other instructor. Uh, I mean, they

were so kind. I, I dunno, they were so kind. This is what motivated me the most. (1st year student)

These findings align with the impressions of students from Pacek's study (2005) at Birmingham University, England, in which the language teacher's personality mattered more than the nationality (N or NN). Participants thought that the essential features of an English language instructor were sensitivity to students' needs and problems, kindness, patience, enthusiasm, and creativity. Thus, with regard to teaching ability, these students, alongside the participants of this study, recognize the importance of pedagogical expertise in an effective language class, regardless of N or NN status. This challenges one of the key tenets of native-speakerism, dispelling the belief that NSs are automatically better teachers solely because of their linguistic background.

However, regarding emotional factors, a large majority reported feeling more comfortable in class with NNS educators due to easier communication than with NS faculty. During interviews students explained that a feeling of security and familiarity was brought on by the perception of a common language and culture. Students noted that when they struggled to articulate their thoughts in the L2, they could switch to their L1 without worry because they knew that the local instructors would understand. One student said: "with NNSs, those who are like Armenians, we can even sometimes communicate in L1 when we don't find the exact words". This finding matches Park's (2009) results; students felt that they had no language barrier with NNESTs, they could easily understand and ask them questions. The fact that these students highlight the importance of emotional and cultural comfort and ease in communication as factors that they value in their educational experience invalidates NS partiality and therefore undermines the prevalence of the ideology in this regard.

4.2. The Challenge of Identifying NSs

The most exciting finding, which was also surprising, and novel since no previous study reported on such a thing, was the confusion over the term NS during the follow-up interviews. While describing their learning experiences at the university, many students could not distinguish whether their current TEFL lecturers were N or NN English speakers. Their statements offered valuable insight into the diversity of their perceptions of the NS term; at the same time, they reflected the uncertainty in the literature around the definition of the NS noted by many scholars (Davies, 1991; Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999). The lack of a clear and absolute definition of the term confused the students, leading them to question the NS status of their instructors. One student said:

Uh, no. I, I didn't, I I wasn't taught by a NS. I just, I mentioned all the NSs when I had the experience in the [university], but I had the question regarding this. But for example, this [NN lecturer], is [this person], a NS, do you? Yes. Then I, yes. If, if [this person] is, if [this person] is a NS, then yes, I have been taught [by a NS]. (2nd year student)

Another student expressed the same confusion about the criteria used to determine whether someone is a NS or not, she said:

Um, actually, at [university] I have been, uh, though I'm not sure who do we consider as NSs? Because, uh, you talked about one of our professors, [NNS 1]. I'm now being taught by [NNS 1], but I'm not sure if [NNS 1] is native or not. But I can remember that once I asked [NNS 1], can you be considered as NS? And [NNS 1] said, no. Uh, also, now I'm being taught by [the name of NNS 2]. And again, I'm not sure can we consider [NNS 2] native or not, but they are the first teachers, not teachers, but professors [lecturing in English] that are not Armenian speakers. So maybe I can consider them

natives, just because they are the first ones in my life that are not Armenian. (1st year student)

The primary source of confusion was identifying the decisive factors for defining the NS. While some believed that a person's status as a NS is linked to the country of origin, others thought it related to accent and fluency of speech, as another student mentioned:

Yeah, sure. For example, uh, during this years at [university], uh, uh, they were, uh, and also [a NNS's name], but I'm not sure, but that they're NSs: Uh, maybe based on their accents, but I'm not sure. Um, I'm not sure they speak fluently. I mean, without any accent or hesitation. (2nd year student)

Interestingly, amid the prevailing perplexity, one student even voiced a different definitional criterion for the term, she said "If they have learned speaking or, uh, speaking English for, uh, more than, uh, 10 years, and if their pronunciation is smooth, I do identify them as a NS," According to this student a person who has been speaking the language for more than 10 years, has a smooth pronunciation and very few grammatical mistakes can be considered a NS. She continued by saying that she and I (the researcher) can be viewed as NSs because we have been using the language for more than 10 years. When questioned about her rationale for the ten-year period she mentioned in her definition and how she concluded that it was valid, her answer was:

I might say experience. Mostly I've been, I, I've seen people, uh, okay. The people that I've seen, uh, from, uh, Lebanon coming back here, the people who have been studying English since kindergarten, most of time do not have much problem, uh, speaking English. And I think that's how I made my estimation, like 10 years. (2nd year student)

To confirm the accuracy of this conclusion after being inquired, the student confessed that she had self-constructed her definition as she did not have enough knowledge about the exact meaning of the term.

The survey data supported these interview findings on the uncertainty experienced by students when discerning whether their instructors were NSs of English. Given several options to choose from, over half of the respondents said a NS is someone who learned the language in early childhood and speaks it fluently. The remaining answers were divided between someone who primarily resides in an English-speaking country (UK, US, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand), someone accepted by the native-speaking community as such, and a multilingual person born in an Eastern country who speaks English as their first language. The other options were considered invalid.

In your opinion, a native speaker of English is...

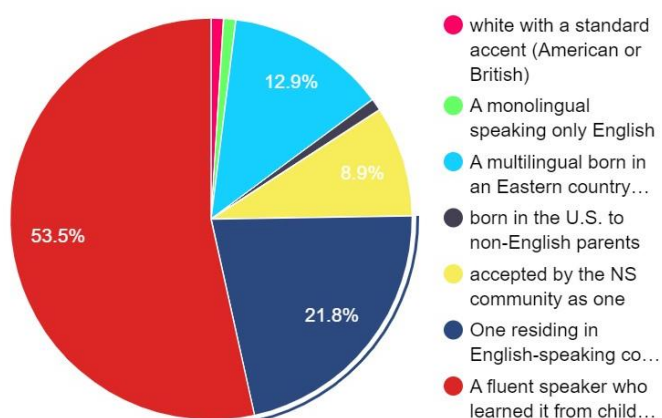


Figure 2. Definitions of the NS by TEFL students
Note. Total N=22

Interestingly, most students chose the option connected with fluency rather than place of birth. Yet the word native refers to where a person is born as it originates from the Latin “nativus” which means “birth.” Additionally, this noticeable lack of consensus among students about the characteristics of a NS emphasized the ambiguity and complexity of the term. This is because the concept of a NS in the related literature is not always clear-cut. It is influenced by various factors, such as country of origin, accent, and level of fluency, (Davies, 1991; Samimy and Brutt-Griffler, 1999), and requires a more nuanced understanding. Another possible explanation might be that the students’ NN TEFL instructors lecturing in the program were extremely proficient which made it difficult for them to distinguish them from NSs. They might be so-called pseudo-native-speakers, a term used by Medgyes (2021) to refer to NNSs with native-like proficiency who are often passed for natives in everyday situations. According to Medgyes (2021), unless exclusively inspected by knowledgeable native-speaker observers, these pseudo-native speakers are not distinguishable and may even be more proficient than the natives in some areas. However, and most importantly, this confusion is due to insufficient knowledge about language ideologies, specifically native-speakerism. An elaborate course implemented around such topics could give them detailed information about the underlying intricacies of native-speakerism, per se, covering definitions of the key terms to iron out their blurry perspectives of the NS label.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study show that most TEFL students’ beliefs were not entirely entrenched by the native-speakerism ideology regarding their perceptions of N/NN instructors as there was no overarching bias for NSs over NNSs. They viewed both types of instructors as capable of providing good instruction in different language areas and meeting the students’ needs throughout the learning. Most of them also believed that regardless of whether an instructor had native proficiency or not, a teaching behavior that included a positive, enthusiastic, caring attitude alongside sound pedagogical skills as in the ability to transfer or make knowledge accessible to students were more likely to create a better learning experience. In affective areas, students preferred NNSs, namely local lecturers due to a shared L1 and culture. However, exclusive preferences for NSs remained in pronunciation and vocabulary, which showed students still believe they could only learn authentic and correct pronunciation from a NS instructor rather than NNS, or other sources. Meanwhile, the confusion experienced by students in trying to define the term NS points to insufficient knowledge about native-speakerism ideology and the concepts involved.

Considering these results, a potential implication for the existing institutional pedagogy at the university might be introducing a new, combined graduate course on Language Ideologies, World Englishes (WEs), and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in the TEFL program. Given that these are important notions in English language teaching and learning, TEFL students who are current and future English teachers should be educated on them immensely. Knowledge of the concepts of WEs and ELF helps them develop a deeper understanding of the dynamic and complex nature of language use. Throughout the course, for instance, students might get introduced to, discuss, and evaluate the various definitions of the term NS in the literature. They can infer that such practices are futile in today’s globalized world where people worldwide can attain proficiency in English equal to that of native speakers using different mediums, and in some cases even surpass it. Such discussions might also alter their perspective on learning certain linguistic aspects, such as pronunciation, vocabulary, colloquial, and idiomatic language. They could learn that although studying from a NS might be helpful, it is not the only option to improve pronunciation and vocabulary. Individual differences, exposure to resources like audio and video recordings, interaction with diverse English-speaker groups

or proficient non-native speakers, and internet sources like AI chatbots are just a few of the multiple variables that provide students with feedback and improve their language.

With WEs, students learn about the diversity of native-speaker dialects in English-speaking countries, and with ELF, they discover the uselessness of such a concept as the native speaker in intercultural exchange. WEs and ELF complement each other by focusing on different aspects of English language use. While it is great to know about all the diverse native varieties around the world, it is equally beneficial to know about the non-native, local varieties of English in outer and expanding countries. It is even better to know how to communicate with individuals using different varieties of English, both native and non-native, in global exchange. This combined course will open their eyes to international communication, teaching them about what is indeed most essential in language use: how to communicate with people outside their country with different norms of behavior and cultural histories since most of the students reported feeling more comfortable with Armenian NN instructors, which is understandable. However, this sense of comfort will be lost once they engage in international communication with people who do not share their language or culture, and the question arises about how equipped they are emotionally and cognitively to address this gap, which is why a course on aspects of ELF is needed to explore and build on their English knowledge to allow them to see the need for international communication. Instead of focusing on how others (NN lecturers) can better comprehend them, as they did during the interviews, TEFL students explore helpful alternative approaches to understanding individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This perspective shift might aid them more in opening possibilities for mutual understanding in intercultural exchanges.

Through WEs discussions, students can learn the names of varieties, identify them, analyze differences, trace their historical and cultural lineage, read texts, and discuss bilingual creativity, cross-cultural discourse, language attitudes, and language in society (Kachru, 1992). Often, contrastive analysis is used to show students the differences between the national (regional or non-native) and international (standard or native) varieties of English. In WEs as well as ELF classes, students will also recognize that the goal of language learning is no longer the ability to manipulate linguistic codes at native-like proficiency but to reach intercultural competence and awareness through using many other language resources for multilingual interaction (Jenkins, 2015). They will become more aware of the different types of English use as they view the varieties of English that deviate from native English as different rather than deficient or incorrect. This new knowledge will transform their attitudes toward language learning and communication.

Therefore, incorporating a course that lectures on all three concepts (language ideologies, WEs, and ELF) in the TEFL program will familiarize students with other varieties of English in the current globalized world and move their focus away from native speaker pronunciation or accent toward using English as a tool for international communication. Through prolonged coursework, projects, and focused discussions, they will have enough time to reflect on their own ideologies while cooperatively considering strategies to navigate these issues in their classes with their students. With more time spent studying these topics, their perspectives on language learning and teaching are also more likely to change. As a result, they will transfer this change to their students as they teach.

5.1. Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the accomplishments, this paper is subject to certain limitations. It is a small-scale study with a limited number of participants and is restricted to only one university and one region in Armenia (Yerevan) so, not all the findings can be generalized. In proposing future

research trajectories, an investigation of the perceptions of students of N and NN subject instructors at the same university can be carried out, or further research about these NN instructors' self-perceptions, to compare them with their students' perceptions. It is interesting to see if they match. As Liu (1999) explained, no matter how teachers/instructors ultimately perceived or defined themselves, the students' perceptions of them may be radically different or in direct contradiction as cited in Braine and Lvovich (1999). Finally, and after having implemented the combined course on language ideologies, WEs, and ELF, another study could be conducted to measure the change in the students' ideological perceptions as well as their understanding of linguistic ideologies, native-speakerism, and the NS construct and its implications for global English use.

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