Native or non-native? Exploring Hong Kong students' perspectives

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Abstract

While the majority of English teachers around the world are non-native speakers, numerous cases of discrimination against non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) have been reported in the literature (Braine, 1999). In an attempt to investigate whether students do show a preference for native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), the present study examines Hong Kong secondary school students' attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs. By administering an open-ended questionnaire, the study revealed that Hong Kong secondary school students show favorable attitudes towards both NNESTs and NESTs, and that they do not necessarily prefer NESTs over NNESTs. While NESTs are perceived as good oral teachers who use interesting and varied teaching methods, they are not preferred as their grammar teachers. On the other hand, NNESTs are considered by students to be competent grammar teachers who show care for them, but are perceived to use less interesting and diverse teaching methods.

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Introduction

English is an international language and is now increasingly used as an important means of international and intercultural communication around the world. In view of its current role and status, English cannot be exclusively associated with native English-speaking countries such as the United States, Canada, or the United Kingdom. Meantime, non-native speakers of English around the world outnumber the native speakers by far (Crystal, 1997), and according to Kachru and Nelson (1996), 'accepting even cautious estimates, there must be at least three nonnative users of English for every old-country native user' (p. 79). A similar phenomenon is also apparent in the English Language Teaching (ELT) profession, with the vast majority of teachers of English as a second and foreign language in the world being non-native teachers.

However, despite the vast number of non-native teachers of English in the world, numerous cases of discrimination against non-native English-speaking teachers have been reported, especially in employment (e.g. Braine, 1999) and NESTs are preferred over NNESTs when employment decisions are to be made. The discrimination impacts negatively on the confidence of NNESTs, their identities as ELT professionals, and their evaluations of their proficiency and pronunciation of English (Burns, 2005). Amin (1997) also found how being non-white influenced their relations with their students, as expressed by a group of 'visible minority' women who were NNESTs in Canada. They thought that some students equate only white people with native English speakers, believe that only native speakers know 'real' English, and see only whites as 'real' Canadians. Braine (1999) also reports that at the master's degree level, while most English Language Teaching (ELT) jobs are restricted to intensive English programs, few non-native speakers (NNSs) have managed to break the unwritten rule 'No non-native speakers need apply'.

A commonly used excuse for the discrimination against NNESTs is that students prefer to be taught by native speakers (Braine, 1999). However, it is doubtful whether students do show a preference for NESTs. Up until now only a handful of studies have been carried out on students' attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs (see, for example, Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005; Liang, 2002; Mahboob, 2003, 2004; Moussu, 2002; Moussu & Braine, 2006; Moussu, 2006). Among them, only Cheung and Braine's (2006) study was conducted outside of the United States, while the other studies were carried out in the United States. As a result of this, it is worth examining the issues surrounding NNESTs and NESTs in a context outside of the inner circle, such as Hong Kong where English is used and taught as a second language. And in particular, it is worthwhile to explore the issue from the students' perspective in order to ascertain whether students do show a preference for native English-speaking teachers over non-native counterparts. In this study, I aim to investigate Hong Kong secondary school students' attitudes towards NNESTs and NESTs. By administering an open-ended questionnaire to 81 secondary school students in Hong Kong, I examine their attitudes and perceptions towards native and non-native English-speaking teachers, with respect to six different areas, namely (1) teachers' teaching methods, (2) students' understanding of teachers' instructions, (3) teachers' care for students, (4) teachers' pronunciation, (5) teaching of English grammar, and (6) teaching of oral English.

Literature review

The native speaker construct

In the ELT profession, it is commonly believed that native speakers are ideal language teachers. According to Braine (1999), native speakers are believed to possess a superior command of fluent, idiomatically correct language forms. They are considered more knowledgeable about the cultural connotations of their mother tongue and as the arbiters of the acceptability of any instances of the language.

A generally agreed upon definition of a native speaker takes the circumstances of acquisition as the major criterion for defining a native speaker; that is, a native speaker is seen as someone who acquires a language in early childhood (Piller, 2001; Davies, 2003). Cook (1999) also sees 'the language learnt first' as a crucial element in defining what constitutes a native speaker. However, in the case of balanced bilinguals who acquire two or more languages simultaneously since the earliest days of language development, the term 'native speaker' becomes more problematic.

It is also problematic to define who is a native speaker and who is not. Indeed, the dichotomy of native speaker/non-native speaker (NS/NNS) is not only problematic, but also counterproductive. According to Davies (1991), no consensus exists as to what is the proper definition of a native speaker. He rejects the idea that the 'native speaker is uniquely and permanently different from a nonnative speaker', arguing that the notion of nativeness in language is a 'myth' and that the native speaker construct is regarded as an idealised construction (1991: 45).

Brutt-Griffler and Samimy (2001) suggest that 'nativeness' constitutes a socially constructed identity rather than a linguistic category. According to Kramsch, the native speaker status is determined by 'acceptance by the group that created the distinction between native and nonnative speakers' (1997: 363). Whether international speakers of English are considered as 'native' or 'non-native speaker' depends upon various social parameters, such as the preconceived notions of what native speakers should look like or sound like (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 2001).

Dominance and difference approaches

In the controversy of NNESTs and NESTs in the ELT profession, Brutt-Griffler and Samimy (1999) identify two major approaches to NNESTs based on the concept of "nativeness", namely the *dominance approach* and the *difference approach*. In particular, the dominance approach is premised on the paradigm of 'deficit linguistics' (Medgyes, 1994; Quirk, 1990), whereby NNESTs are viewed as 'linguistically handicapped' (Medgyes, 1994: 103) in relation to NESTs. The difference approach to the NNESTs, on the other hand, emphasizes the strengths of NNESTs. According to such an approach, both NNESTs and NESTs are equally capable of being good language teachers, regardless of their different backgrounds. Indeed, NNESTs should not be considered inferior to NESTs, given that they possess valuable linguistic and pedagogical resources which are as important as the resources that NESTs possess. Scholars (see, for example, Braine, 1999) taking such an approach place particular importance on pluralism and collaboration in the profession. However, what is common in both approaches are the underlying assumptions and ideology of the opposed identities of professionals in the field of TESOL (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 1999).

Native and non-native teachers

Medgyes (1992) acknowledges the native/non-native distinction, with particular reference to their language competence. He suggests that NNS teachers cannot aspire to acquire a NS's language competence, given that 'non-native speakers can never achieve a native speaker's competence' (1992: 342). He argues that NESTs and NNESTs reveal considerable differences in their teaching practices and that most of the discrepancies are language-related. However, NNS teachers are not by definition less efficient (Medgyes, 1992). Whilst Medgyes (1992) recognizes the language deficiencies of NNESTS, he assets that NNESTs possess a number of distinctive strengths and advantages over NESTs. For example, NNESTs can serve as imitable models of the successful learners of English; they can teach learning strategies more effectively; they can be more empathetic to the needs and problems of their students; they can provide learners with more information about the English language; they are more able to anticipate language difficulties; and they can benefit from sharing the learners' mother tongue.

Drawing on an empirical study of the self-perception of a group of Austrian teachers, Seidlhofer (1999) found that a majority of the teachers felt insecure rather than confident being non-native teachers of English. While they see the main advantage of being non-native speakers is that they share their students' L1, their confidence based on the shared language and culture with their students is coupled with a lack of confidence they have about themselves as speakers of English. Despite the feeling of insecurity, other factors such as experience are found to help teachers gain self-assurance. As non-native teachers have to learn the language they teach themselves, they are distanced from it, which gives them confidence in explaining certain aspects of the language and other concepts. Indeed, Seidlhofer argues that an important strength of non-native teachers is that they show a high degree of conscious, or declarative, knowledge of the internal organization of the English language because of their own language learning experience. Hence, they can 'get into the skin of the foreign learner' (1999: 43). In short, non-native teachers are at the same time familiar with the target and distanced from it, enabling them to be effective teachers of English. Indeed, non-native teachers are what Seidlhofer calls 'double agents' in the sense that they mediate between the different languages and cultures through appropriate pedagogy so as to make informed choices that benefit learners.

Empirical studies on students' attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs

In what follows, I shall review a number of empirical studies on students' attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs, including Samimy and Bruff-Griffler (1999), Kelch and Santatn-Williamson (2002), Mahboob (2004), Adophs (2005), Butler (2007), Cheung and Braine (2007), Lasagabaster and Sierra (2005) and Moussu and Braine (2006).

Samimy and Bruff-Griffler (1999) examined how non-native students in a graduate TESOL program perceived themselves as professionals in the field of ELT, whether they believed that there were differences in the teaching behaviors of native speakers and non-native speakers. Qualitative data were collected by means of classroom discussions, in-depth interviews, and analysis of autobiography writings of student participants. The results suggest that more than two-thirds of the participants reported that difficulties with the language affected their teaching from "a little" to "very much". They saw NESTs as

being fluent and accurate; using different techniques, methods and approaches; being flexible; using conversational English; knowing subtleties of the language of the language; using authentic English; providing positive feedback to students and have communication as the goals of their teaching. On the other hand, NNESTs were perceived as relying on textbooks; using the first language as a medium of instruction; knowing the students' background; being sensitive to the needs of the students and having exam preparation as the goal of their teaching. Despite these differences, the students did not consider the native speaker teachers superior to their nonnative counterparts.

Kelch and Santatn-Williamson (2002) investigated the attitudes of 56 ESL students towards NESTs and NNESTs in the United States. By using audio-taped passages read by 3 native and 3 non-native English speakers and an attitude survey questionnaire, the study revealed that the students were in most cases unable to distinguish a native English speaker from a nonnative speaker, and that attitudes towards teachers with different accents of English is not correlated with whether a speaker's accent is native or nonnative, but instead is correlated with the students' perception of whether the speaker is native or nonnative. In addition, they found that there is a correlation between (a) what students considered as native-speaking accents and (b) favorable teacher traits such as a high level of training and education, greater teaching experience and excellence in teaching. In other words, a teacher who was perceived as a NS was viewed more favorably by the students than a perceived NNS. In particular, the students showed a preference for a NS instructor when it came to learning speaking, listening, and pronunciation. Despite the students' preference for a teacher with a native accent, they cited two major advantages of NNESTs, namely, that NNESTs had experienced same difficulties in learning a second language as the students themselves, and that NNESTs were viewed as a source of motivation, showing students the possibility of reaching a higher level of proficiency.

Mahboob's (2004) study aimed at evaluating ESL students' attitudes towards NS and NNS teachers in the United States and investigating factors that influence students' perceptions of their teachers. 37 students were invited to write their own perceptions regarding the issue of NS and NNS teachers in response to a stimulus topic, and data were analyzed using a discourse-analytic technique, following Hyrkstedt and Kalaja (1998). It needs to be noted that Mahboob's study is one of the first studies to employ qualitative data in exploring students' perceptions of NS and NNS teachers. An advantage of using such an approach is that the findings are not based upon a priori categories. The results of the study show that ESL students in the United States do not display a clear preference for either NS or NNS teachers. Rather, they think that both NS and NNS teachers have unique attributes. Indeed, the distribution of perceived strengths for NS and NNS teachers is complementary. While NS are perceived as good at teaching oral skills, vocabulary and culture, NNS teachers are seen as good at teaching literacy skills and grammar, and answering students' questions, and the students also show a preference for NNS teachers' teaching methodology. However, NNS teachers were criticized as being unable to teach oral communication skills, and such weakness may be due to the students' belief that in order to acquire a 'true' and 'correct' pronunciation, they must follow native speaker models. In Mahboob's (2004: 143) words, '[b]oth NESTs and NNESTs working collaboratively can provide a better learning environment to ESL students'. Importantly, Mahboob suggests that students are not naïve and do not necessarily hold the belief that native teachers are ideal language teachers, or what Phillipson (1992) calls 'native speaker fallacy'.

Taking a longitudinal perspective, Adophs' (2005) study examined how language learners' attitudes towards native speaker English are affected by exposure to native-speaker English. By interviewing a group of students from different countries who study in a British university, she investigated their attitudes towards language learning and towards the host country. Adophs found that many language learners have a rather simplistic notion of the native speaker, but such a concept soon becomes fragmented as they live in an English-speaking environment. It is argued that exposure to native-speaker English plays an important role in assessing the value of it for one's own language learning goals. A number of students in the study underwent a considerable change in attitudes towards the concept of native speaker. While they considered that assimilation to native speaker norms may facilitate communication and integration into the host culture, such a process is also associated with great difficulties. Also, they were more critical of the usefulness and learnability of certain aspects of such a variety, as well as the value of conforming to native speaker norms. Instead, they redefined the ideal model as someone who speakers 'standard English' or 'BBC English', distinguishable from the type of native speakers that students encounter in their lives in the UK, and they shifted the focus of their language learning goals towards mutual intelligibility in an international context. Meanwhile, other students took a more pragmatic view and argue that as long as they can understand one another, they do not feel the need to be able to speak like a native speaker. Adophs' study is particularly interesting in the sense that she demonstrates how students develop a critical awareness of the notion of 'native speaker English' and redefine their language learning goals accordingly based on their experience with native speaker English in the UK. Her study is also original, since very few studies in the field of World Englishes have taken a longitudinal perspective like Adophs' study.

Butler's (2007) study examined students' attitudes towards teachers with American-accented English and Korean-accented English. A matched-guised technique was employed. The study found significant differences in the students' attitudes towards the teachers with American-accented English and Korean-accented English with regard to their 'goodness of pronunciation', 'confidence in their use of English', 'focus on fluency versus accuracy, and 'the use of Korean in the classroom', but not regarding 'general teaching strategies'. More specifically, the Korean students thought that the American-accented English guise had better pronunciation, was relatively more confident in her use of English, would focus more on fluency than on accuracy, and would use less Korean in the English. In other words, certain qualifications are more important to NS teachers while a different set of qualities are more important for NNS teachers. Yet, other qualities may be regarded as important regardless of NS or NNS status. In addition, the students generally showed a preference for the American-accented English guise as their English teacher. Butler's study contributes to the attitudinal studies on NS and NNS by employing a matched-guised technique in probing into students' attitudes. However, her study did not look at students' actual experience with NS and NNS teachers, but relied on the use of different accents in eliciting students' attitudes towards NS and NNS teachers.

Lasagabaster and Sierra's (2005) study explored students' views on the pros and cons of having NESTs and NNESTs as their English teachers. Seventy-six university students from the Basque Country participated in the study and were asked to complete both closed and open questionnaires. A 5-point Likert scale was used in the close questionnaire which was made up of 42 statements. The results suggest that more than half of the respondents (60.6%) show a preference for NS and 35.5% do not have a clear

preference. However, when they were given the possibility of having both NS and NNS teachers, the percentage increased to 71.6%. Lasagabaster and Sierra also found that the university students preferred NESTs in the areas of pronunciation, culture and civilization, listening, vocabulary and speaker, while they showed a preference for NNESTs in the areas of grammar and strategies. However, the students did not show any preference for NESTs or NNESTs in the other areas, namely reading, assessment, attitudes towards English speaking countries and attitudes towards the learning of English. Another interesting finding is that whereas the students preferred NESTs at university level in most areas, this was not true for primary education. In the open questionnaire, most of the respondents recognized the strengths of NNESTs. In particular, they valued the NNESTs as a resource of learning strategies, and saw NNESTs as imitable models. Lasagabaster and Sierra's study is important in that it looks at students' perceptions towards NESTs and NNESTs with respect to different aspects of language teaching and in relate to different levels of education. Hence, their study goes deeper than the question of students' preference for NS or NNS teachers in general.

Moussu and Braine (2006) attempted to examine ESL students' attitude change after being taught by NNS teachers. Two questionnaires were administered to almost 100 students in a university in the US. While the initial one was administered at the beginning of the semester and the second one was given at the end of the semester. It contained three sections to measure students' perceptions of their NNS teachers: (a) demographic information, (b) opinions about and past experiences with NNS teachers in general and (c) questions about the students' current teachers. Moussu and Braine found that students held positive attitudes towards NNS teachers at the beginning of the semester. Most students indicated that they could learn English just as well as from NNS teachers and that they respected and admired their NNS teachers. On the whole, the students' responses showed a high degree of support for their NNS teachers. In Moussu and Braine's study, the most important finding is that the students' attitudes towards their NNS teachers increased positively over time, despite a lack of significant change over time. A possible reason is that the students already had positive opinions of their NNS teachers at the beginning of the semester. In particular, 76% of respondents recommended their NNS teachers to a friend by the end of the semester, compared to only 57% at the beginning of the semester.

Up until now, Cheung and Braine (2007) is the only study which investigated the attitudes of students towards their NNESTs in the context of Hong Kong. Data were collected through a questionnaire adapted from Plakans (1997) and semi-structured interviews. The results of the study indicate that on the whole, the students showed a favorable attitude towards their NNS English teachers. They stated that NNESTs could employ effective strategies in teaching English, understood the difficulties encountered by the students, and were capable of designing teaching materials according to the needs and learning styles of the students. However, the respondents also cited several NNS teachers' shortcomings, including their examination-oriented teaching approach, their limited use of English in class, and the tendency to over-correct students' work. Cheung and Braine also found that final-year students indicated a more positive attitude than first- and second-year students, implying that the students' positive attitude towards NNS English teachers tended to increase with longer stay at the university. A possible reason may be that the students are likely to meet more qualified and more competent NNS English

teachers at university and are less conscious of the 'native speaker fallacy' (Phillipson, 1992). As a result, they are more willing to question the superiority of NS English teachers.

In summary, the studies on NESTs and NNESTs reveal that NESTs are still preferred by students in the areas of pronunciation and language accuracy, while NNESTs are also found to be perceived in a positive light by their students. In other words, students do not necessarily show an unfavorable attitude towards NNESTs. While most of the studies reviewed are situated in the United States, it is worth exploring the issues surrounding NESTs and NNESTs in an outer-circle context, such as Hong Kong. While Cheung and Braine's (2007) study employed a largely quantitative methodology, my present study intends to complement their study by adopting a qualitative approach to the issues surrounding NNESTs and NESTs with the use of open-ended questionnaires. In particular, it is the intention of the study to probe into the specific reasons for the students' preferences for NESTs or NNESTs so as to present a more complex picture of students' perspectives on native and non-native English teachers, especially when students' preferences for NESTs or NNESTs may vary depending on different aspects of ELT involved. Moreover, whereas Cheung and Braine's study looked at NNESTs only, the present study attempts to explore students' perceptions of *both* NNESTs and NESTs so that a comparison can be carried out.

Research questions

For the present study, two research questions are set out to guide the general direction of the research, namely:

(1) Do Hong Kong secondary school students prefer NNESTs over NNESTs?

(2) What are the respective strengths and weaknesses of NESTs and NNESTs in teaching English as perceived by Hong Kong secondary school students?

Methodology

In order to gather the students' attitudes towards native and non-native English-speaking teachers, an open-ended questionnaire was designed by the author and distributed to 81 secondary school students in Hong Kong.

Participants

The 81 participants in the present study came from two secondary schools in Hong Kong. They were studying in Secondary 4 and were aged between 15 and 16. One class from each school was chosen to participate in the study. 40 students from School A and 41 students from School B were involved. Of the 40 students in School A, 24 were male and 16 were female. As for School B, 22 were male and 19 were female.

Instrument

Six questions were included in the questionnaire, as shown below. All the questions required the students to indicate a preference for either an NNEST or an NEST in different

aspects of teaching, although they may also indicate a neutral position in their answers. The questionnaire was written in English, but the students were allowed to answer in either English or Chinese. Despite the choice of using Chinese in answering the questionnaires, all the respondents completed the questionnaires in English. In the analysis that follows, the student quotations are cited verbatim from the questionnaires without any editing.

(1) Do you like an NNEST or an NEST's teaching methods more?
(2) Do you understand an NNEST or an NEST's instructions better?
(3) Do you think an NNEST or an NEST show more care for you as your English teacher?
(4) Do you prefer an NNEST or an NEST to teach you pronunciation?
(5) Do you prefer an NNEST or an NEST as your oral English teacher?
(6) Do you prefer an NNEST or an NEST as your English grammar teacher?

Data collection

The open-ended questionnaires were distributed to the two classes by two research assistants in March 2009. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaires during class time. They were also informed that they were allowed to withdraw from the study if they felt uncomfortable about completing the questionnaire, and no penalty would be imposed. The questionnaires took approximately 40 minutes to complete, and the return rate of the questionnaire was 100%.

Data analysis

The written data was typed and word-processed, generating 31 pages of comments from the students. All the comments were categorized according to the six questions listed above, but were later re-categorized if the comments did not actually fit into any of the particular questions. In the process of categorizing comments, I noticed that quite a number of students' answers to a particular question might actually be more appropriate to another question. In the end, I re-arranged all the comments into six main categories we first intended to look at, namely, namely (1) teachers' teaching methods, (2) students' understanding of teachers' instructions, (3) teachers' care for students, (4) teachers' pronunciation, (5) teaching of English grammar, and (6) teaching of oral English.

Result

In presenting the findings of the questionnaire, I divide this section in six sub-sections corresponding to the six categories. The number in the square brackets below is used to identify the student whose comments are cited.

Teaching methods

In the area of teaching methods, NESTs are preferred over NNESTs by the majority of the students (76%, N=62) who think that NESTs use more interesting and wide-ranging methods in teaching English and prepare more attractive materials. On the other hand,

NNESTs employ more traditional teaching methods which students sometimes find boring.

A majority of students express their preference for NESTs' teaching methods because they think that there is a greater variety of activities in the lessons of NESTs. Students think that such activities as games can help them learn better, as one student says, '*I can learn a lot from the games… And we were not just playing games but we could also learn English. For example, when I was singing the English song, I can improve my oral skills*' [#26]. Some students also find that the teaching methods used by NESTs are new to them and are seldom used in a NNEST's class, as one student reveals, *'I like NETs because they don't have the same culture as ours so they may have new ideas or games to apply in class*' [#50].

It is also notable that the students think the materials used by the NESTs are more interesting and more wide-ranging than those prepared by NNESTs. A student comments that '*Hong Kong local English teachers […] always give us some worksheets to do or let us write a composition and then improve our grammar […] I feel this way of learning English is very standard and sometimes it will be boring […] It is very different from the NET. The NET uses many materials to teach us English*' [#1]. And when students receive the tailor-made notes prepared by the NESTs, they find them more interesting and appealing. On the other hand, the students find NNESTs' notes look stereotyped and of a fixed or standard format. It may be the reason why the students find the notes and handouts designed by NESTs more interesting.

Another reason why students prefer NESTs' teaching methods is that they think that they can with the NESTs than with NNESTs. Here are some comments of students on lessons with NNESTs: '*[t]he local English teacher would not let us learn from the games and the lyrics of a song. Instead, they rather prefer us to sit in the class and pay attention to them*' [#21] and '*Hong Kong local English teachers are always serious in class. Most of them wouldn't play games with us. They just teach us in a formal way. So, students always think the lesson is very boring*' [#5].

Students' understanding of teachers' instructions in English

In investigating students' understanding of NNESTs' and NESTs' instructions in English, I find that the majority of the students (81.5%, N=66) indicate that they understand NNESTs better, and find it hard to comprehend NESTs' speech.

A number of students state that they cannot understand the NESTs because they speak too fast and there are too many difficult words used in their speech. '*It is not very difficult to understand the NET teachers, but sometimes they speak quite fast because they expect the students to understand. They also use some difficult words that we do not understand*' [#13] and '*[t]he words that they (the local teachers) use are more simple and easier to understand*' [#48]. In addition, students think that the NESTs are not familiar with the level of English of the students and that they maintain their fast speaking rate and use difficult words when teaching English. It results in students experiencing some major difficulties in listening to NESTs as they cannot catch up with the speed of NESTs. On the other hand, other students think that the speaking pace of local teachers is about right for them: '*I felt it was more difficult to understand what the NET said than what the local teachers said. It is because their speaking pace is fast. They say many difficult words. The local English teacher's speaking is easier to understand than the NET. Their speaking pace is suitable for us. I can understand what they say*' [#29].

Indeed, some students comment that they cannot understand the NESTs even though the NESTs try to slow down their speaking pace and use some simpler words. As the NESTs cannot explain the concepts or words in Cantonese, some students may continue to fail in understanding the ideas. A student, for example, mentions that, '*if there are some difficult words or abstract concept, they [local teachers] can explain in Cantonese to let us understand clearly*' [#52]. Some even comment that the NESTs are not considerate as they do not use easier words to explain the ideas: *'NET teachers don't understand how to speak in Chinese. They just express their opinions as they want. They may ignore whether we understand. They may not consider whether the words are difficult for us*' [#31].

However, while it is quite challenging to understand the English spoken by NESTs, some of the students think it can be beneficial. For example, a student states that '*it's not bad at all, as I understand the meaning of the difficult words gradually if they always say those words*' [#18].

Teacher's care for students

When asked about whether they think NESTs or NNESTs show more care and sympathy for students, the majority of students (74%, N=60) think that NNESTs show more care for them than the NESTs do.

While the students think that the NESTs are nice, they believe that the relationship with NESTs is not as close as that with the NNESTs. As NESTs can only speak in English and most of them do not know Chinese, students are afraid to talk to them as the students think their English is not good enough to engage in a conversation with NESTs. One student points out that '*I don't know how to strike up a conversation with the NET as I'm afraid of talking with a foreigner*' [#2], and the other student thinks that '*sometimes, I want to talk to the teachers, but the NETs cannot understand or misunderstand if I do not speak well, they can't show their care to me*' [#58]. Another student also provide similar remarks: *'Maybe I have less chance to talk to the NETs , so I think they show their care less*' [#34].

Students think that since the NESTs are from different cultures, they sometimes may not understand their situations and do not share similar topics to talk about with the students. This might be another reason why students think that the NESTs show less care for them: *'the NET do not understand us very clearly due to our difference in culture and language*' [#19]. Some students may even think that the cultural difference may worsen their relationship: *'Sometimes we will not agree with the culture or values of the NETs, there will be arguments. With local teachers, we share the same culture and can easily understand each other*' [#58].

Nevertheless, there are students who think both types of teachers care for them as well as students who think all of them do not care for them at all. A student mentions that '*No, I don't feel any care for me from both of them'* [#6]. On the most positive end, a student says, '*Yes, I can feel them care about me, NET and local teacher listen to me, and they know what I said*' [#3]. Here, we can see that some students do like both teachers and think that the care they show for them is of the same degree.

Teacher's pronunciation

Turning to students' comments on NESTs and NNESTs' pronunciation, most students (86%, N=70) share the impression that the NESTs speak better English than NNESTs do. A majority of the students think that NESTs speak more 'standard' English and their

pronunciation is more accurate. For example, one student says, *'Hong Kong teacher's spoken English is not standard when compared with the NET teachers'* [#9]. They assume that NESTs must speak English accurately and should be superior in teaching pronunciation because they are native speakers of English: '*I think that pronunciation of NET teachers is more professional, although Hong Kong local English teachers' pronunciations are not bad'* [#12] and *'NETs' English is more standard and traditional'* [#37].

In addition, some students expect the NESTs to correct their pronunciation mistakes and to help them get rid of their accent when speaking English: '*I prefer NET teachers…because the foreigners can speak more accurately. To learn English, we have to talk in correct sounds. The NET will correct our Cantonese accent so that we can speak English more accurately*' [#35]; and *'their [the NETs'] pronunciation is more correct. And I was once taught the differences between British and American English'* [#59].

A number of students mention that they could acquire the accents of the NESTs if they are taught by NESTs. For example, some students state that: *"I can learn their accent and they speak in English more fluently and naturally"* [#2], and *"I would prefer NET teachers as my oral English teachers. It's because I can learn standard foreign English and get used to listening to standard English. I can also understand more about the intonation of English"* [#33]. It shows that students recognize that the NESTs speak with a different accent from their own, and that the students appreciate the opportunity to be exposed to the NESTs' accents because they may think that if they can manage to listen to and learn from the NESTs' accents, then they may be able to understand or speak with the other foreigners who come from the same countries.

Oral teacher

When the students are asked if they prefer NESTs or NNESTs as their English oral teachers, the majority of them (71%, N=58) prefer NESTs. The major reason is that they think that the NESTs speak better English and they can correct students' pronunciation, a point which was made in the last section on pronunciation.

Another major reason why most students prefer NESTs as their oral teachers is that they are forced to speak English during the communication because NESTs cannot speak Cantonese. A number of comments are as follows: '*we are forced to speak in English because they don't know Chinese*'; '*they can push students to check the dictionary and train us to listen and speak because they won't speak in Chinese'* [#53]; '*NET teachers cannot speak Chinese and don't know Chinese, so students must talk in English'* [#12]; *'[i]f the oral English teacher is a HK local teacher, I would like to talk to him/ her in Cantonese but not in English, so I can't practice my spoken English*' [#5]; '*[i]f we have any questions, we must ask them in English and without saying any Chinese because they don't know any Chinese. So, we can improve our English if a NET teaches us*' [#29].

In addition, some students prefer NESTs to be their English oral teacher because they think that the NESTs employ better teaching methods and that their lessons tend to be more interesting than those taught by NNESTs, as some respondents say, *'NETs' teaching is more fun!'* [#12]; *'NET teachers teach you how to speak by drawing pictures or watching movies. It's a useful way to improve our speaking skills'* [#8] and '*they may have new ideas or games to apply in class*' [#48].

Another major reason why students like to be taught by NESTs in oral lessons is that NESTs encourage students to speak more. So students are given more opportunity to

speak in English: *'NET teachers encourage us to speak more and help us to overcome speaking difficulties'* [#14]; '*[s]ome students think that the NETs encourage more interaction. The NETs have different materials, for example, the songs and the games. And they encourage more interaction'* [#38]. In general, the NESTs are perceived to employ interactive teaching approach and encourage students to speak and interact with students more. In addition, some students think that they can gain more confidence by taking with NESTs in speaking classes: *'we can learn to speak confidently in front of foreigners'* [#53]; '*they can help us to build up our confidence in speaking in English*' [#34]. Here, we see that students feel that if they can communicate with the NESTs effectively, they will be able to speak in front of other foreigners with more confidence.

Some students prefer both NESTs and NNESTs to be their oral teachers as they think that both of them can train them in different oral aspects. For example, one student mentions, '*I think both the NET teachers and Hong Kong local teachers are good oral English teachers. On the one hand, the NET teachers can teach us the correct pronunciation. On the other hand, Hong Kong local teachers can practice oral discussion with us because they can understand our thoughts more, and they can teach us oral discussion skills' [#20].*

Grammar teacher

When students are asked if they prefer NESTs or NNESTs as their grammar teachers, the result is completely different from the previous section on students' preference for oral teachers. It is found that the majority of the students (80%, N=65) prefer NNESTs as their English grammar teachers.

An important reason is that students rely on NNESTs to explain the difficult grammatical structures in Cantonese because students think that English grammar is difficult to master and they may not be able to understand what the NESTs mean if they explain grammar in English. Here are the students' comments, *'I would prefer HK local teachers to teach me English grammar. Sometimes, grammar is difficult to understand. If the teachers use English to teach me English grammar, I can't understand it. So using Cantonese to explain would make me feel easier to follow'* [#5]. Another student states, '*I prefer Hong Kong local teachers to teach me English grammar because I'm not good at grammar. I can ask the teachers in Chinese and they can explain to me in Chinese'* [#24]. A student points out that NNESTs can explain abstract concepts in English grammar with the use of Cantonese: *'if there are some difficult words or abstract concept, they can explain in Cantonese to let us understand clearly'* [#50].

Furthermore, students point out that NNESTs understand their problems and difficulties better by knowing their level of English proficiency. For example, they say, *'HK local teachers would know our problems about learning English grammar better'* [#21]; *'[i]f local English teachers teach us English grammar, we will understand it more easily because the local teachers know more what we need'* [#29]; '*local teachers know our level clearly but the NETs do not'* [#30]. Some students think that NNESTs know their English level better and tend to use simple English to explain grammar, as some students say, *'[t]he words that they [local teachers] use are more simple and easier to understand'* [#46]; *'they [local teachers] will consider our English level and ability. They can use simple English to let us understand those difficult grammar items'* [#2].

Meanwhile, a number of students comment the NESTs do not care much about grammar. For example, some students say, *'most of the NET teachers' grammar is not good'*

[#12]; *'the NETs may not be good at grammar, like I am not good at Chinese'* [#32]. Another student also mentions that '*[w]hen we use the wrong tense and ask the NET teachers questions, they cannot help us solve our problems*' [#11].

Still, some students prefer both NESTs and NNESTs to teach them English grammar because they think that both possess the professional ability of teaching grammar, as one student says, '*[b]oth of them are very good at English and they have their professional ability to teach us'* [#19]; '*I prefer both. English is the main language of NET, so they know more about their English tradition. They have full knowledge of English. On the other hand, HK local teachers learn English for many years, they have many experience'* [#1]. Some also think that NESTs and NNESTs can focus on different aspects when teaching grammar. For example, one student says, *[l]ocal English teachers can give me lots of grammar materials and provide effective training. But I think NET teachers can teach us more typical English grammar'* [#33]. From the students' comments, it seems to be a good idea for the co-operation between NESTs and NNESTs when planning grammar lessons, although most Hong Kong secondary schools tend to assign most oral lessons to the NESTs who seldom take up grammar lessons.

Discussion

It is evident in the present study that Hong Kong secondary school students do not necessarily prefer NESTs over NNESTs in every aspect of language teaching. Indeed, when analyzing the qualitative data, we can see a wide range of comments made by students about NESTs and NNESTs, and it is very difficult to say with certainty whether NESTs or NNESTs are preferred by the students. Even when it comes to oral teachers, not all students prefer NESTs, even some of them mention the disadvantages of NESTs as being oral teachers. In other words, we should move away from asking the broad question of whether students prefer NNESTs or NESTs. Instead, we need to focus on students' preference for NESTs/NNSTs in specific areas of teaching, such as pronunciation, grammar and oral skills, so that it is possible for us to understand a more nuanced picture of students' perceptions of NNESTs and NESTs.

In accordance with the findings of the previous research (e.g., Cheung & Braine, 2008; Moussu, 2006; Moussu & Braine, 2005), the results of this study reveal that Hong Kong students show favorable attitudes towards NNESTs. It is found that the students recognize the strengths of NNESTs in teaching English, especially in showing care and sympathy for students, teaching English grammar, and understanding students' English levels and needs. Hence, in light of the students' positive attitudes towards NNESTs, NNESTs should not be discriminated in employment in the ELT profession simply because of the unjustified excuse that NESTs are preferred by students.

Significantly, the perceptions of the students about native and non-native English-speaking teachers have implications for language teacher education in general. In particular, the students' comments point to the specific areas of weaknesses of both native and non-native English-speaking teachers. For example, NNESTs may need to prepare more attractive and wide-ranging materials for the students. It is possible that the students may be more motivated to learn English if the materials are more creative and if more interactive activities can be incorporated in the NNESTs' classes. NNESTs may also need to make an effort to improve their English proficiency, despite their heavy teaching

duties. On the other hand, NESTs may need to re-evaluate their ways of teaching grammar, since a number of students mention that NESTs pay little attention to the area of grammar. It is important to acknowledge the students' concern about grammar and NESTs should make an effort to accommodate the students' expectations and needs, especially if grammar is an important component in the students' examinations.

In view of the different weaknesses of NNESTs and NESTs, team teaching practices may be implemented in schools in order to maximize the strengths of both NESTs and NNESTs. As Carless (2006) notes, team teaching between NESTs and NNESTs allows the complementarity of NEST and NNEST skills to be exploited profitably. Such practices are premised on the assumption that NESTs and NNESTs possess vastly different abilities and attributes so that they can complement each other (Carless, 2006). According to Medgyes (1992, 1994), the strengths and weaknesses of NESTs and NNESTs are largely complementary. It is believed that students can benefit most if they are given the opportunity to learn from both NESTs and NNESTs. In such a case, students may be more content with what they are learning, and it may enhance their motivation in learning English.

Furthermore, the present study demonstrates the importance of raising students' awareness of the 'native speaker fallacy'. It is important to promote the strengths of NNESTs in students' mind. In addition, the professional identities of NNESTs need to be validated by the schools and other authorities, so that students do not develop the impression that NNESTs are inadequate and incompetent language teachers. Meanwhile, the weaknesses of NESTs must be recognized by the schools, so that they do not blindly hire native speakers of English, regardless of their professional training and experience. It is hoped that with the increased awareness of the 'native speaker fallacy', students do not hold the belief that NESTs are superior to NNESTs.

It is also noticeable that misconceptions exist among students with regard to the goals of language learning and the notion of language standards. In some cases, they may believe that they need to sound like a native speaker, and that native speaker's English is more 'accurate' than Hong Kong speakers' English. It is suggested that students should be informed of the latest developments of English as a *lingua franca* in international contexts. One way to do so is to engage students in critical discussion of the politics of English in class, and the topics may range from the use of English around the world, the different varieties of English, the role of English in international communication, to the notions of language standards, ownership of English, and the relationship between language and culture. For example, Baumgardner and Brown (2003: 248) suggest that 'the pluricentrality of English should be a part of [the] students' linguistic knowledge, and they should know when to use one variety versus the other'. It is therefore imperative for students to understand the reality surrounding the English language, so that they do not hold misled prejudice against NNESTs.

Conclusion

The present study examined Hong Kong secondary school student's attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs, with respect to six aspects of language teaching: (1) teachers' teaching methods, (2) students' understanding of teachers' instructions, (3) teachers' care

for students, (4) teachers' pronunciation, (5) teaching of English grammar, and (6) teaching of oral English. The results of the study reveal that Hong Kong secondary school students generally show favorable attitudes towards NNESTs and NESTs, and that they do not necessarily prefer NESTs over NNESTs. It was also found that the students recognize the strengths and weakness of both NNESTs and NESTs. While NESTs are perceived to be good oral teachers who use interesting and varied teaching methods, they are not preferred as their grammar teachers. On the other hand, NNESTs are preferred by students as their grammar teachers who show care for their students, but are perceived to use mundane teaching methods. It is noteworthy that the results of the study also draw attention to the range and diversity of comments made by students about NESTs and NNESTs, thereby underscoring the complexities of the issues surrounding NNESTs.

However, the present study is merely a small-scale research project, with a small student sample size (N=81) which was drawn from only 2 different schools in Hong Kong. It would be worth investigating students' perspectives on NNESTs and NESTs with a larger sample size. Another limitation of the present study is that questionnaires, although they could be of great help in an exploratory study or in the preliminary study of a large study, may not be the most useful tool in probing into students' views and perceptions in greater depths. It is suggested that other research instruments, such as semi-structured interviews, can be used to triangulate and expand upon the findings. Despite the shortcomings, it is hoped that the present study provides a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of NESTs and NNESTs from the students' perspectives, and that the contributions of NNESTs can be duly recognized and valued, so that cases of unjust discrimination against NNESTs may be reduced in the years to come. Further research on NNESTs is necessary, and in particular, it would be encouraging to see more empirical studies that move away from the simplistic question of whether students prefer NESTs or NNESTs to more nuanced questions about the specific strengths and weaknesses in particular areas of language teaching.

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