

An Examination of Students' English Achievements Taught by Native Versus Non-Native English Teachers

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Abstract—In recent decades, the issue of being a native English-speaking teacher (NEST) or a non-native English-speaking teacher (NNEST) has become an increasingly important area of study in non-native English-speaking countries. However, in some academic institutions, not all non-native speakers (NNSs) and NNS teachers are treated the same way because of the perception that one group is better than the other, which could negatively affect the teaching process as a whole. For this reason, this study endeavours to investigate Saudi students' achievements in four English courses. By adopting a quantitative design for collecting and analysing data, students' scores in English courses taught by both NESTs and NNESTs were compared and statistically analysed. The findings revealed that students performed equally in the exams regardless of their English teachers' nationalities and mother tongues. Such findings suggest that both NESTs and NNESTs had their own contributions to the profession if they were given equal support and working conditions. Finally, the study concluded with some suggestions and recommendations for further research.

Index Terms—English teachers, EFL, native speakers, non-native speakers

I. INTRODUCTION

The division of native speakers (NSs) from non-native speakers (NNSs) has its roots in applied linguistics, second language acquisition, and L2 teaching literature (Agudo, 2017). However, there has been a long dispute regarding native and non-native teachers who teach English in 'teaching English to speakers of other languages' (TESOL) contexts, raising many issues and concerns (Paikeday, 1985; Davies, 2003, 2013; Medgyes, 1992, 1994; Brain, 2005; Mahboob, 2018; Riordan, 2018). One of the most notable issues is the belief that an NS should be the norm, which is not accurate and acceptable because there are several English varieties that exist in the world, such as English as a lingua franca (Nelson et al., 2020). Another issue is that the employment of the term 'native' to produce perfectness carries a discriminatory practice, and it should be applied by proficiency as a criterion (Paikeday, 1985; Davies, 2003). More importantly, professional jealousy might occur as a consequence of such discriminatory practices among teachers; not everyone can control or cope with it. Such a belief comes from different sources, and each one should be dealt with separately, such as native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) themselves or the preferences of students and their parents regarding NESTs and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) (Harmer, 2015).

However, the distinction between NESTs and NNESTs is still problematic and racist in some instances (Davies, 2003; Kachru, 1985). According to Kachru's (1985) model, three circles are to be considered to better understand the classification of English used all over the world. In the inner circle, English represents the traditional historical basis, and English is used as the mother tongue and first language in daily life and by the government in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. The second is the outer circle, which represents countries that are often former colonies of the British empire, and English is used as the second language for social life or for practical purposes, such as in India, Kenya, Ghana, and others. The third circle is the expanding circle, which represents countries that use English as a means of international communication in business and education, and English is regarded as a foreign language. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, Japan, and Korea are included in this circle. This model has been criticised by many for oversimplification and other drawbacks. For example, Graddol (1999) maintains that the inner circle does not necessarily represent perfect English. Nevertheless, this model is still dominant and accepted by employers to differentiate between NESTs and NNESTs. In addition, there are opposing views on the strengths and weaknesses of NESTs and NNESTs as well as on how to test the English proficiency of NNESTs. Some suggest that such proficiency is determined by many factors, such as the accent degree and years of learning English (Hendricks & van Meurs, 2022). For this reason, a thorough look is required and other directions are needed to address these concerns considering other factors shown in the following account.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Theoretical Background

Medgyes (1992), as a pioneer in the field of teachers' nativeness, took the lead in the 1990s by proposing that both NSs and NNSs teach differently, but they can bring a lot to the profession and can become equally effective language professionals. What matters is language competence because nativeness does not guarantee successful language learning.

In the twentieth century, Brain (2005) asserted that scant research has emerged on the issues of NNSs, and he maintains,

This may be due to the sensitive nature of these issues because NNS teachers were generally regarded as unequal in knowledge and performance to [NESTs] . . . and issues relating to NNS teachers may have also been politically incorrect to be studied and discussed openly. (p. 11)

In addition, Mahboob (2018) pointed out that the literature on NNESTs is still new, and many stakeholders need to be reached, such as programme directors and managers, to reach a mutual awareness. Riordan (2018) held that scant research has been done on NNSs as language learners. She suggested that researchers should inform language teachers' programmes because such programmes can meet the needs of language learners. More importantly, pre- and in-service training teacher programmes have to move from theory into practice through the design of different activities and tasks inside classrooms as well as for continuing and professional development (Medgyes, 2017). Teachers need to address different concerns related to teaching practices and reflect on areas of strength and weakness.

English nowadays is taught over the world with an increased number of English teachers. For this reason, the number of NNESTs has become greater than that of NESTs where English is the dominant foreign language. More and more NNESTs are needed to cater to the growing demands of English-learning students (Canagarajah, 2012; Rose et al., 2021; Breeze & Guinda, 2021). English is regarded as an international language for communication in many countries around the world (Medgyes, 2017). For this reason, the discussion of this issue becomes open and looked at from different angles. For example, one way to look at nativeness is to examine the characteristics of NSs. An NS has acquired their mother tongue in childhood and has the intuitions and unique capacity to deal with the features and skills of their mother tongue efficiently, such as grammar, speaking, and writing (Davis, 2013). Davis used the term 'native user' to deal with the problematic use of NSs in terms of their varieties or the issue of bilinguals and maintains,

Putting the two elements together is a way of according status to the second language speaker, who is highly proficient and who uses the language in many (most?) aspects of life, both at work and at home. (p. 11)

Another way to tackle this issue is by ignoring the division between NESTs and NNESTs and replacing it with 'qualification and readiness' or employing multilingual speakers of English instead of NNESTs (Canagarajah, 2012), which leads to better English language teaching practices. Medgyes (1994) held that some characteristics give NNESTs superiority over NESTs, such as being more sensitive to their students and sympathetic to their language problems, being better guessers of language difficulties, and making better use of the students' mother tongue. Moreover, what constitutes good teachers, i.e. proficient teachers, is the needed skills and knowledge and who can teach any English course with efficiency regardless of their nationality and mother tongue. Being an NS does not guarantee being a proficient teacher (Kamhi-Stein, 2016). Hall (2017) asserted that the importance of NNSs cannot be ignored for now and in the future, and the attention would shift to what teachers can do rather than where they come from. Part of this problem could be attributed to the key role of teacher preparation programmes and in-service training workshops as well as how they address this concern as a kind of strategic advocacy (Mahboob, 2018).

B. Studies on NESs and NESTs

Several studies were conducted to touch on the issue of nativeness from different perspectives and in different contexts. For example, Daoud and Kasztalska (2022) performed a study to delineate the criteria put by employers after reviewing 53 online job advertisements. They observed that NSs are regarded as models and a benchmark against which all other NNSs would be judged. They suggested that to deal with such discriminatory practices, other characteristics should be considered, such as how competent and qualified teachers are. Qui and Fang (2019) did another study to explore students' perceptions of teaching practices of content teachers, i.e. NSs and NNSs. They found that both categories employed teacher-centred approaches to teaching. However, NSs utilised more interactive practices with diverse teaching methods, but they lacked the knowledge of the home culture of the students, and NNSs were more aware of intra-cultural competence and attended easily to the students' learning obstacles. Similarly, the strategies used by NSs and NNSs to deliver their classes were explored by Vraciu and Curell (2022), who focused on the comprehensible input and students' interaction inside classrooms. They found that NSs implemented more strategies to maintain the comprehensible input, unlike NNSs, who were keener in fostering the students' interactions. Also, the views of the students towards NSs teaching other languages seem to be similar. Tiranant et al. (2022) determined the views of foreign students learning Thai by NSs. The students held more positive attitudes towards the different roles of NSs who taught grammar and pronunciation. Unlike with NNSs, the students believed that NSs were more experienced and knowledgeable about their mother tongue and were able to provide the students with authentic learning materials.

In a Saudi context, several studies were done by researchers to touch on the issue from different perspectives. One way is to evaluate the teaching effectiveness of both NESTs and NNESTs. For example, Elyas and Alghofaili (2019) examined the EFL Saudi language proficiency in listening and speaking skills to determine whether there was any significant difference between two groups of students. One group was taught by NNESTs and the other by NESTs. After utilising the pre- and post-test procedure, the findings indicated no significant effects based on the students'

performance as both groups performed equally. Students' positive or negative perceptions about NESTs and NNESTs and what postulates ideal teachers were investigated by Abdul Qadeer (2019). The results showed that both groups of teachers had their advantages and disadvantages, but the majority of students were in favour of NNESTs. The students believed that NNESTs were good at teaching reading, grammar, and writing, while NESTs were better at teaching listening and speaking. A similar study about students' perceptions done by Haque and Sharmin (2022) revealed that the students were in favour of native teachers for reading, listening, and speaking, while they preferred non-native teachers for grammar and writing skills. In another study, Alqahtani (2022) examined how NSs define the term 'native speakers' and react to discriminatory practices against NNSs with whom they work. The study revealed that although the recruiters and students had their own criteria to define NSs, focusing on the place of birth, the NSs defined themselves in a less direct and straightforward way. They also showed that they were unhappy about being superior to their NNS counterparts, although it gave them privilege and status.

It is clear from the above studies that the issues of NSs and NNSs have been examined from different perspectives, including students' views and attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs, recruiters, NSs' views, and students' progress after being taught by NSs and NNSs. However, based on the local studies, few explore students' progress in a Saudi context, especially for university students. Therefore, it is the aim of this study to fill in this gap.

C. Statement of the Problem

In Saudi Arabia, English has a consolidated and palpable role in the education system at all learning levels. It is considered the primary foreign language to be taught to students, especially in public schools. English also has official status in different sectors at various levels apart from the educational system, such as the political, economic, health, and industrial sectors. In many schools and universities, English is the main means of learning for students, especially in higher education, to place them in the global market as an aspect of globalisation. Before the university level, English is taught as a separate school subject by NESTs or NNESTs, such as those in some international schools. Later, English courses are taught in all private and public Saudi universities as a compulsory prerequisite for preparatory-year students, and they must pass these courses to pursue their academic studies. At different colleges, English is used exclusively and regarded as the main means of instruction. Both private and public universities and colleges as well as diverse industrial and government institutions hire NESTs and NNESTs to teach English to Saudi students. Indeed, having both NS and NNS teachers in academic organisations has its own ups and downs. On the one hand, one might give credit to institutions hiring and recruiting both NESTs and NNESTs as they have different employment methods and diverse opportunities, and the students, as a result, could have various learning opportunities. On the other hand, if not all teachers are treated equally and NNS teachers are especially treated as inferior and less capable of handling some language skills, those teachers would feel less confident in their language ability, marginalised, and therefore more stressed.

In the area where the study was conducted, however, teachers could not choose the courses they wanted to teach. Rather, the head of the English department and the coordinators of different courses, most of whom are NSs, tell the teachers what to teach. For example, speaking and writing courses are often given to NESTs, while reading and grammar courses are given to NNESTs. In addition, communication skill courses are only given to NESTs who are American or British speakers to ensure perfect English pronunciation. In exams, if a question has more than one answer, only NESTs can tell and suggest the closest answer to that question. In some cases, both NESTs and NNESTs are given the same courses to teach. To tackle this problem, the students' scores in the courses taught by both NESTs and NNESTs were compared. The study aims to answer the following questions:

1. Is there a significant difference between the students' grammar achievement scores as a result of their teaching by NESTs and NNESTs?
2. Is there a significant difference between the students' reading achievement scores as a result of their teaching by NESTs and NNESTs?
3. Is there a significant difference between the students' writing achievement scores as a result of their teaching by NESTs and NNESTs?
4. Is there a significant difference between the students' communication skills scores as a result of their teaching by NESTs and NNESTs?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. The Sample

A total of 640 male students participated in this study. The students were enrolled in a preparatory year program (PYP) at the English language department of the King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences in Riyadh. The sample was chosen purposively and divided into two groups for each taken course. One group was taught by NESTs from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada while the other by NNESTs from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Sudan, and Philistine.

B. Data Collection and Analysis

The data gained from this study were based on the students' scores after taking a unified mid-term exam on four English courses – i.e. grammar, reading, writing, and communication skills – after 10 weeks. For the communication skills course, the exam was divided into the listening part (taken on paper) and the speaking part (taken orally) and was conducted by the course teacher and an assessor. For data analysis, the data were collected and analysed quantitatively. A t-test was run to calculate the numerical differences between the two groups, such as the mean, standard deviation, and T-value of the data using the SPSS package. The ethical issues were taken into consideration while analysing the data. The researcher used numbers to refer to the students to protect their identities.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

TABLE 1

T-TEST FOR THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DIFFERENCES IN THE AVERAGE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE GRAMMAR SUBJECT BETWEEN STUDENTS STUDYING WITH NATIVE TEACHERS AND STUDENTS STUDYING WITH NON-NATIVE TEACHERS

<u>Groups</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Std. Deviation</u>	<u>T-value</u>	<u>Sig.</u>
Native	65	54.74	4.80	0.11	0.916 (N. S.)
Non-native	65	54.63	6.64		

Table 1 is related to the first research question, 'Is there a significant difference between the students' achievement in grammar as a result of their teaching by native and non-native teachers?' It is clear from the information above that the value of (T) is not significant, which indicates that there are no differences in the average achievement of the grammar course between students studying with native teachers and students studying with non-native teachers.

TABLE 2

T-TEST FOR THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DIFFERENCES IN THE AVERAGE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE WRITING SUBJECT BETWEEN STUDENTS STUDYING WITH NATIVE TEACHERS AND STUDENTS STUDYING WITH NON-NATIVE TEACHERS

<u>Groups</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Std. Deviation</u>	<u>T-value</u>	<u>Sig.</u>
Native	63	44.30	4.34	1.20	0.234 (N. S.)
Non-native	63	43.37	4.45		

Table 2 answers the second research question, 'Is there a significant difference between the students' achievement in writing as a result of their teaching by native and non-native teachers?' As shown above, the value of (T) is not significant, which indicates that there are no differences in the average achievement of the writing course between students studying with native teachers and students studying with non-native teachers.

TABLE 3

T-TEST FOR THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DIFFERENCES IN THE AVERAGE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE READING SUBJECT BETWEEN STUDENTS STUDYING WITH NATIVE TEACHERS AND STUDENTS STUDYING WITH NON-NATIVE TEACHERS

<u>Groups</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Std. Deviation</u>	<u>T-value</u>	<u>Sig.</u>
Native	96	46.68	6.44	0.08	0.936 (N. S.)
Non-native	96	46.59	7.92		

In Table 3, an account is given to the third research question, 'Is there a significant difference between the students' achievement in reading as a result of their teaching by native and non-native teachers?' The value of (T) is not significant, which indicates that there are no differences in the average achievement of the reading course between students studying with native teachers and students studying with non-native teachers.

TABLE 4

T-TEST FOR THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DIFFERENCES IN THE AVERAGE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE COMMUNICATION SKILLS SUBJECT BETWEEN STUDENTS STUDYING WITH NATIVE TEACHERS AND STUDENTS STUDYING WITH NON-NATIVE TEACHERS

<u>Groups</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Std. Deviation</u>	<u>T-value</u>	<u>Sig.</u>
Native	96	52.82	6.44	1.25	0.213 (N. S.)
Non-native	96	51.73	5.66		

Table 4 answers the fourth research question, 'Is there a significant difference between the students' achievement in communication skills as a result of their teaching by native and non-native teachers?' Here, the value of (T) is not significant, which indicates that there are no differences in the average achievement of the communication skills subject between students studying with native teachers and students studying with non-native teachers.

The findings of this study clearly reflect those of Elyas and Alghofaili (2019), who postulated that students performed equally in the exams regardless of their English teachers. One possible explanation for this finding is that all the English teachers who were involved in this study followed the exact same syllabus and stuck to it for the whole semester. They also had to implement the same teaching practices and give the same teaching materials and exercises. The unification of exams was another important factor. All the English teachers had to contribute to the exams and make sure that these exams met the course objectives. The students were equipped with the same question format prior

to the exams and took the same unified exam. All these issues were discussed in the regular meetings with the courses' coordinators and supervisors as well as the workshops run by the same coordinators to attend to necessary related matters. This supports the notion that both NSs and NNSs have their own contributions to the profession, working with and benefiting from each other, as suggested by the related literature (Canagarajah, 2012; Medgyes, 1994; Kamhi-Stein, 2016; Hall, 2017). NSs utilise more interactive practices because they can communicate English naturally. NNS teachers know much about the home cultures of their students and how the school systems of their students have functioned since they started their education. For instance, such teachers can explain grammatical rules in a simple and direct way and may compare them with rules from the students' mother tongue to help them overcome learning difficulties.

This falls into the support and advocacy given to NNSs in pre- and in-service training programmes and workshops, which are vital in addressing this issue (Mahboob, 2018; Riordan, 2018). While such programmes and workshops offer new ways of teaching and supporting teachers with the knowledge and educational skills they need, many other issues still need to be addressed and discussed among NNS teachers. For example, teachers can share their experiences in teaching and suggest different developmental activities and training methods, especially to those in their early years of teaching. Also, more experienced teachers can suggest ways for novice teachers to adapt to various working conditions inside and outside classrooms. Such support would enable them to have more confidence in the classroom and to eliminate any sort of teaching insecurity. In a teachers' training programme, many topics are related to the students' and teachers' beliefs about learning and teaching English; these beliefs come from different sources and serve as a background that guides the process of teaching and learning, yet some of these beliefs are insufficient and based on only personal experiences. This would be a good starting point for NNESTs to discuss and examine when teaching and raising issues with NESTs.

The findings also disagree with those that give superiority to native English teachers in teaching EFL students (Daoud & Kasztalska, 2022; Qadeer, 2019). Based on the research results, any discriminatory practices from the employers are no longer justified. At the departmental level, practices and power relations between the head and the teachers as well as among the teachers within the institution can create tension in the workplace. These practices stem from the administrative institutional structure and its philosophy in teaching. The head of the department is a NEST, and all his decisions regarding operating the institution might be reflected in his background knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learning. His implicit prejudices clearly guide his actions and individual decisions at different levels. To tackle this, I think that NNESTs can initiate a friendly dialogue with the head of the department and openly address this concern and its consequences. Although a few of them have already done this, the head of the department would tell them that their students have reported their preferences in the course-end evaluation questionnaires, albeit making big decisions by listening to what the students say is unprofessional. Teaching as a profession requires taking responsibilities from highly positioned people to ensure professional practices. Teachers can also tell whether they were hired for their expertise and qualifications in the field as the majority of them have master's degrees and graduated from abroad. They want to share their decisions about the courses and what to teach and explain why they want to teach such courses but in a diplomatic way. They can raise this issue at departmental meetings from time to time to show that it is a common concern and that all teachers should be treated equally. Giving priority to NESTs over NNESTs can carry discriminatory views and practices in the whole workplace and result in tension.

As some employers justify what they do as a response to students' preferences, students' views and attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs should be examined further, although helping them to dispel this presupposition is not easy (Vraciu & Curell, 2022; Tiranant et al., 2022; Abdul Qadeer, 2019). Students hold positive and negative preferences towards English teachers for different reasons. The investigation process can be done academically via research or informal discussions with students, who can be affected by implicit prejudices which determine their preferences for NS teachers. They might prefer NS teachers because they believe that such teachers have ownership of the English language and are the only ones who can produce perfect English. Another reason for this preference is that many students are familiar with American or British pronunciation because of the influence of media, and thus, they have better opportunities to hear and practice their pronunciation in front of their NS teachers. They can practice informal English with such teachers and learn more about slang expressions, or they might prefer NS teachers because they tend to use many words and phrases more naturally. Students might also be encouraged and motivated by NS teachers who can say anything in English, unlike NNS teachers, who often use their mother tongue to ask questions. Some students have already joined language institutes to learn English in Saudi Arabia. The way that such institutes advertise themselves is another important factor. They put American or British flags on their reception desks, and several pictures from the United States or the UK hang on their walls. Some institutes use catchy advertisements such as 'Be native with the help of native-speaking teachers', while other institutes hang pictures of NSs using words and phrases such as 'confidence', 'fluent', 'proficient', 'right choice', and so on to attract their students. Other institutes resort to mass media to market themselves to students. Indeed, the negative impact of mass media on formulating students' beliefs should be considered (Oda, 2017).

The students' perspectives – e.g. their parents' opinions about or preferences for NESTs – are another factor. In some situations, parents are the source of such beliefs (Harmer, 2015). Parents want their children to be taught by NS teachers because they had seen their usefulness when they studied abroad. Some parents might be disappointed by public schools

because they are full of poorly skilled NNS teachers, or they may think that their children being taught by NS teachers is a prestigious social marker. To address this, teachers remind their students that they began learning English before the university level by experienced NNS teachers. NNS teachers are living proof that the English language can be taught by any proficient teacher regardless of his or her nationality. What matters is the knowledge, skills, training, and quality of teaching that these teachers can bring to the table. English has become an international language spoken by hundreds of millions of people as a foreign language, and a great deal of people speak perfect English other than NS teachers.

V. CONCLUSION

This study investigated Saudi students' achievements in four English courses while being taught by both NESTs and NNESTs. It has gone towards enhancing deeper understanding of NESTs and NNESTs in a Saudi context. Overall, the findings revealed that students performed equally in the exams regardless of their English teachers. Such findings suggest that both NESTs and NNESTs would have their own contributions to the profession if they were placed in an equal supporting environment and worked together to achieve the courses' objectives.

Indeed, as the term 'native' is seen as problematic (Davis, 2013), the two terms 'native' and 'non-native', while seemingly in conflict with each other, could be looked at or treated as complementary rather than contradictory. Both NS and NNS English teachers, if treated equally, can collaborate with and benefit from each other to share their experiences of what works for the students and bring their best to the profession. NNESTs can help NESTs to better predict the language difficulties that some students encounter as they share the mother tongue of these students. At the same time, NESTs can explain cultural issues that maximise learning to NNESTs as they are more aware of their language and help to overcome any discriminatory practices as a result of this division (Paikeday, 1985; Davies, 2003). Finally, the findings suggest that there is no single root to this problem and that the problem should be addressed from different angles. Several factors might lead to the belief that only NS teachers would represent a better language model. More research is needed in the Saudi context to tackle this issue from different perspectives, including the students' views and attitudes toward NESTs and NNESTs, recruiters, NSs' views, and the students' progress whether they are taught by NSs or NNSs.

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