



Exploring Learners' Perceptions of an Effective EFL Teacher: Insights and Implications

Alice Mae M. Arbon

Jose Rizal Memorial State University, Philippines

Jerico Juan Esteron

De La Salle University Manila, Philippines

Zhang Kankan

Zhejiang University, Ningbo Institute of Technology, China

Introduction

In July 2017, an online news report headlining China's intention of hiring Filipinos to teach English in China came into circulation (Del Callar, 2017). Apparently, China has officially included the Philippines in its list of countries where it can source English teachers for its universities and primary and secondary institutions. What is interesting in this report, aside from the implication that there will be added employment opportunities for Filipinos, is the "willingness" of China to accept Filipino teachers to teach English, which apparently will only be made "official" by the Chinese government should the two countries come to a final labor agreement. This actually raises the questions of (1) why this is being done now, since for so many years now, Filipino teachers have already been teaching English in Chinese institutions, albeit on informal and contractual bases; and (2) what has stopped China from hiring Filipino English teachers. Answers to these questions would call attention yet again to the issue of English language nativeness.

(Non)Native English-Speaking Teachers

For a number of years now teaching English as a second or foreign language has not been spared from issues relating to the dichotomy between native speakers and non-native speakers. The notion that native speakers are more effective in teaching English is not surprising, given that their being native speakers is often perceived to be synonymous to their ability to provide "authentic" English language learning. This is supported by the notion that since English is their first language, they also bear an inherent right to teach it and the culture it represents. Thus, it is normal to hear people, non-speakers of English specifically, expressing their preference for native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) over non-native

English-speaking teachers (NNESTs). This perceived preference for NESTs over NNESTs has been challenged by scholars, most especially those that come from the outer and expanding circle countries.

Mahboob et al. (2004) argue that despite the fact that NNESTs outnumber NESTs, the former are still put in a disadvantaged position. The strong preference for NESTs may have come from two groups: (1) EFL students themselves, and (2) the administrators who hire these NESTs. More than the EFL students, however, the administrators of various educational institutions, language programs to be specific, are the ones who proliferate the unfortunate view toward NNESTs. Since they place greater weight on the teacher's linguistic background rather than their pedagogical qualifications, NNESTs are displaced, or if hired at all, remain in the shadow of the NESTs in their roles, functions, salary and benefits.

Canagarajah (1999) states that native speakers are ideally better teachers of a language because of the cultural knowledge they possess. He does not mean, however, that nonnative speakers are less competent teachers of English than native speakers. Nevertheless, Canagarajah (2005) argues that the motivations for the marginalization of NNESTs in the English teaching and learning industry are not linguistic or pedagogical but economic and political. Mahboob (2010) adds that research conducted on NNEST issues support this notion for the reason that (1) there is no need for them to be native-like to be competent in English, (2) they teach English for its functional purposes, and (3) they treat teaching and learning English as contextualized in an environment where 'local traditions and practices' are observed.

Walkinshaw and Duong (2014) echo previous studies that argue against the disenfranchisement of NNESTs. They note that in the Asian context, NESTs are usually preferred by companies over the NNESTs, for the former are seen as "models for authentic, natural pronunciation, despite comprehensibility issues" (p. 7). However, their study clearly reveals how EFL students' place primacy on their EFL teachers' pedagogical knowledge rather than their 'native or non-native speakerness' (Walkinshaw & Duong, 2012).

However, Cheung and Braine (2007) note how students and teachers alike recognize both NESTs and NNESTs' assets. NESTs are more valued for their proficiency and knowledge of the target culture, while NNESTs are more valued for their being fellow "ESL learners," being able to relate to the students in terms of their shared local culture, and their being structure-focused in teaching English (Braine, 2005). In fact, quoting Matsuda and Matsuda (2001), Liu and Zhang (2007) claim that NESTs and NNESTs "complement each other with their strengths and weaknesses" (p. 163). Interestingly, Mahboob (2004) concludes that based on their perceptions, ESL students manifest a vague preference toward NESTs and NNESTs. Students do not necessarily associate effective language teaching and learning with the teacher's nativeness. He maintains that NESTs and NNESTs can work in a collaborative nature to create more informed and improved learning contexts.

Informed by the aforementioned theories, this paper explores the perceptions of EFL learners of an effective EFL teacher in the context of a Chinese classroom. The researchers embarked on this study for an updated view of whether EFL students still took issue with their teacher's linguistic background and whether their perceptions of an effective English teacher was related to the teacher's status as a native or non-native speaker of English. Specifically, the researchers address the following questions: What factors affect EFL learners' perceptions of an effective EFL Teacher? Do these perceived factors correlate with the learners' perceptions whether their teacher is a native or non-native speaker of English?

Methodology

A mixed methods approach was employed to achieve the goals of the study. The researchers utilized a purposive sampling technique in choosing the research participants. The researchers first asked an English teacher to read a script of a grammar lesson, which the researchers adapted from Kelch and Santana-Williamson (2002) (see Appendix A). This teacher has a minimum of five years teaching experience and is currently enrolled in a doctorate degree in a private institution in the Philippines. The recording was then sent to Ningbo, Zhejiang, China, where one of the researchers of the study is based.

The recording was played to 34 undergraduates who are currently taking an English class, thus considered EFL learners. After the recording was played, the students were asked to answer a questionnaire. Translated in Chinese, the questionnaire had a total of five questions, four closed-ended questions and one open-ended. The first two questions were about the respondents' perceptions regarding the two aspects of an effective teacher, which are: (1) perceptions about whether they would learn a lot from the teacher, and (2) perceptions about whether they would be comfortable as a student of the teacher in the recording. As a follow-up to these two questions, the respondents were asked to identify the factors that would affect these two aspects: (a) the teacher's pronunciation of words, (b) the teacher's grammar, (c) the teacher's speed in speaking, (d) the teacher's intonation, (e) the teacher's teaching experience, and (f) the teacher's knowledge on the subject/lesson. The third question was about the respondents' perceptions about whether they would hire the teacher in the recording, while the fourth question concerned the respondent's perceptions about whether the teacher is a native speaker. The fifth question was an open-ended one asking them to describe an effective EFL teacher (see Appendix B for a copy of the questionnaire). To determine (1) the association between the respondents' perceptions of the aspects of an effective EFL teacher and their perceptions about the teacher in the recording as a native speaker, and (2) the association between the respondents' perceptions about whether they would hire the teacher and their perceptions about whether the teacher in the recording was a native speaker, the Fischer's exact test was done, as the size of the data required a nonparametric test, with α set at 0.05.

Results and Discussion

The presentation and analysis of data are divided into two sections. The first addresses the factors that affect EFL learners' perceptions of an effective EFL teacher, while the second addresses the correlation or non-correlation of factors with the learners' perceptions of a native speaker of English.

Factors Affecting Learners' Perceptions of an Effective EFL Teacher

After listening to the audio recording, the students were asked two questions: (1) Would you be able to learn a lot from this teacher? (2) Would you be comfortable as a student of this teacher? After this, they were further queried as to the factors behind their responses. Based on their responses, these two factors emerged: (1) learning a lot from the teacher, and (2) feeling comfortable with the teacher.

Learning a lot from the teacher

When the respondents were asked if they believed that they would learn a lot from the teacher in the recording, almost 90% of the respondents believed that they would. Further inquiry on the factors that affected this perception or belief revealed that the salient factors are the teacher's pronunciation, intonation, and her teaching experience (see Tables 1 & 2).

TABLE 1
Learning a Lot from the Teacher

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	30	88.2
No	4	11.8
Total	34	100.0

TABLE 2

Factors Affecting Their Perception that They Would Be Learning a Lot from the Teacher

	Frequency	Percent
Teacher's pronunciation of words	24	70.59
Teacher's grammar	8	23.53
Teacher's speed in speaking	16	47.06
Teacher's intonation	19	55.88
Teacher's teaching experience	17	50.00
Teacher's knowledge on the subject/lesson	15	44.12

Although it is understood how the teacher's pronunciation of the words could be a salient factor, it is interesting to note that the experience of the teacher has been noted by the students as it would not be easy to tell how experienced the teacher was by relying solely on a recording of a lesson.

Feeling comfortable with the teacher

Almost similar to the results in Tables 1 and 2, slightly more than 90% of the respondents said that they would be comfortable as a student of the teacher. Among the factors affecting this perception, the prominent ones that emerged are the teacher's pronunciation, pace in speaking, and teacher's experience (see Tables 3 & 4).

TABLE 3

Feeling Comfortable Being a Student of the Teacher

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	31	91.2
No	3	8.8
Total	34	100.0

TABLE 4

Factors Affecting Their Perception that They Would Feel Comfortable Being a Student of the Teacher

	Frequency	Percent
Teacher's pronunciation of words	22	64.71
Teacher's grammar	8	23.53
Teacher's speed in speaking	18	52.94
Teacher's intonation	14	41.18
Teacher's teaching experience	18	52.94
Teacher's knowledge on the subject/lesson	9	26.47

It is interesting that students believe that they would feel comfortable as a student of a teacher with good pronunciation. Moreover, it is again noted how they could infer a teacher's experience based on the recording.

For both factors — learning a lot from and feeling comfortable with the teacher — two salient factors were identified: pronunciation and teaching experience. It can be inferred that students believe that they would improve in learning the English language better when their English teacher pronounces words well and when the teacher had sufficient experience teaching students in their context. See the verbatim responses of three students:

I think an English teacher to qualify must have accurate pronunciation as students mostly listen to learn. If the teacher fails to pronounce right the students will pronounce wrongly as well.

.....

So, I think effective English teachers must have their own special way to teach English, which would make students feel interested instead of dizzy. Apart from this, an effective English teacher should have good a pronunciation and proper speed because students' speaking skill [is] influenced

by their teacher's. Teacher plays an important role in the development of students' speaking skill, that's why I think pronunciation and speed are necessary.

.....

In my opinion, a qualified English teacher should have hardcore English capacity and also he must be able to pass it to the student in a proper way. Standard and clear pronunciation. Moderate speaking speed. Skillful grammar. Certain level of teaching experience and adequate understanding of and preparation for the lessons. The teacher should keep in mind all the time the students' reception and reply with clear explanation and answer to difficulties. He/she should make adjustment in teaching schedule according to different situations.

With regard to experience, Walkinshaw and Doung (2012) also found the same result as their Vietnamese students preferred their teachers with teaching experience. From the students' responses in the open-ended question that required them to describe an effective EFL teacher, these students believed that an English teacher should not only have the linguistic knowledge, but also the right strategies in handling the class. As two students put it,

What's more, I think a qualified English teacher needs to have good oral and good writing. As a teacher, he has to teach his students to learning problems, but also to help students with problems in life. In order to help students improve their English scores, teachers can hold activities, such as English songs competitions and so on. What a teacher taught us is not only knowledge, but also learning spirit.

.....

In my opinion, a qualified English teacher should understand fully the teaching contents and make them against boredom, in other words, learning in happiness. No forced study but make students love studying. Of course, he/she should maintain the professional level: accurate pronunciation and standard grammar. To make the grammar understood step by step. To timely correct the students' inaccurate pronunciation. He/she should be practised in spelling and inform the students how to remember the vocabulary rapidly and effectively. Enable the students fall in love with English rather than make them burdened with English as a study task. To mobilize the initiative of study. Individualized teaching. To discover and cultivate confidence of the students arising from studying English. To explore and mould a set of effective teaching methods. To take guides in a way more acceptable to the students and enable the students fall in love with English.

From these statements, an English teacher can only impart a 'learning spirit' to his students when he himself has had sufficient experience in handling EFL students. Specifically, they expect their teachers to practice various learner-centered strategies.

Despite the positive responses from the students regarding the two questions as to whether they would learn a lot from the teacher in the recording, and whether they would be comfortable as students of that teacher, an interesting result emerged when asked whether they would hire the teacher personally, or as a personal tutor. Only half of them would, as shown in Table 5:

TABLE 5
Probability of Hiring the Teacher as Personal Tutor

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	18	52.94
No	16	47.06
Total	34	100.0

This is an interesting finding which merits further investigation. It is intriguing because the majority of them were certain that they would learn a lot, and that they would be comfortable, then why would they not hire the teacher as a private tutor? Is there then a difference between a classroom teacher and a

personal/private tutor? Another speculation would be that their perception of an effective EFL teacher would be affected by the teacher's nativeness when it comes to private tutorials.

Correlation of Perceived Factors with Learners' Perceptions

To answer the second question, the students were first asked whether they perceived the teacher in the recording as a native speaker. From their responses, a correlation analysis was done between their answers in the previous section (refer to Tables 1 and 3) and their answers here. From the data gathered, more than 75% of them responded with a "yes," as seen in Table 6:

TABLE 6
Perception that the Teacher in the Recording is a Native Speaker of English

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	26	76.47
No	8	23.53
Total	34	100.0

This is interesting because the teacher in the recording is not a native speaker. She is in fact an EFL/ESL teacher who is taking post graduate studies in a private institution in the Philippines, and who has more than five years of teaching experience.

The first correlation to be determined is the correlation between the learners' perceptions of *being able to learn a lot from the teacher* and their perceptions of the teacher *being a native speaker*. Statistically, the question is: Is there a significant association between the learner's perception of being able to learn and the learner's perception of the teacher in the recording being a native speaker? After the Fischer's Exact Test, it was found that the null hypothesis should be accepted (see Table 7).

TABLE 7
Association between Learners' Perception of 'Being Able to Learn a Lot from the Teacher' and Their Perception of the Teacher 'Being a Native Speaker of English'

Using Fisher's Exact Test with $\alpha = 0.05$		
<i>p</i> -value	Decision	Interpretation
0.678	Fail to reject the null hypothesis	The two perceptions are independent.

The second correlation to be determined is the correlation between the learners' perceptions of *feeling comfortable with the teacher* and their perceptions of the teacher *being a native speaker*. Statistically, the question is: Is there a significant association between the learner's perceptions of feeling comfortable being a student of the teacher and the learner's perceptions of the teacher in the recording being a native speaker? After subjecting the data to the Fischer's Exact Test, it was found that the null hypothesis should be accepted (see Table 8).

TABLE 8
Association between Learners' Perceptions of 'Feeling Comfortable Being a Student of the Teacher' and Their Perceptions of the Teacher 'Being a Native Speaker of English'

Using Fisher's Exact Test with $\alpha = 0.05$		
<i>p</i> -value	Decision	Interpretation
0.434	Fail to reject the null hypothesis	The two perceptions are independent.

The third correlation to be determined is the correlation between the learners' perceptions of *feeling comfortable with the teacher* and their perceptions of the teacher *being a native speaker*. Statistically, the question is: Is there a significant association between the learner's perceptions of hiring the teacher as a private tutor and the learner's perceptions of the teacher in the recording being a native speaker? After

conducting the Fischer's Exact Test, it was found that the null hypothesis should be accepted (see Table 9).

TABLE 9

Association between Learners' Perceptions of 'Hiring the Teacher as a Private Tutor' and Their Perceptions of the Teacher 'Being a Native Speaker of English'

Using Fisher's Exact Test with $\alpha = 0.05$		
<i>p</i> -value	Decision	Interpretation
0.656	Fail to reject the null hypothesis	The two perceptions are independent.

Based on the statistical analysis, there is no significant relationship (1) between the learners' perceptions of *being able to learn a lot from the teacher* and their perceptions of the teacher *being a native speaker*; (2) between the learners' perceptions of *feeling comfortable with the teacher* and their perceptions of the teacher *being a native speaker*; and (3) between the learners' perceptions of *feeling comfortable with the teacher* and their perceptions of the teacher *being a native speaker*. This means that when students agree that they would learn a lot from the teacher, such agreement is not associated with their perceptions about whether the teacher is a native teacher. Further, this means that when students feel that they would be comfortable as students of this teacher, such a perception is not associated with their perceptions about whether the teacher is a native speaker. The Chinese EFL context, therefore, supports Mahboob's (2004) study of ESL students. In that study, it was noted that based on the ESL students' perceptions, they do not necessarily associate effective language teaching and learning with the teacher's nativeness. He further claims that NESTs and NNESTs can work in a collaborative manner to create more informed and improved learning contexts.

Conclusion

The findings of the study support the notion that an effective EFL teacher is one who could teach students much about the English language and one who would make them comfortable in class. The factors affecting these perceptions are the teacher's lexical pronunciation and the teacher's teaching experience. These two perceptions, however, are not significantly associated with their perceptions about whether the teacher is a native speaker. Moreover, the findings of this study imply that students no longer mind whether an English teacher is a native speaker. Their perception is now based on their personal assessment of the capability of the teacher, not his or her nativeness.

As this study is very limited to a certain institution, it is recommended that further investigation would have more respondents, preferably from different parts of China. Moreover, the researchers recommend that it would be better to delve deeper into students' reasons why they would not hire the teacher as their personal or private tutor. School administrators are reminded yet again of the idea that the origin of the teacher or the nativeness of the teacher should not be a deciding factor for hiring. The students themselves see no significant association with their learning and their teacher's nativeness. Finally, NNESTs should not feel inferior toward NESTs. After all, as Mahboob's (2010) study concludes, there is no need for NNESTs to be native-like to be competent in English. They must only continue their practice of teaching English for its functional purposes.

The Authors

Alice Mae M. Arbon obtained her M.A. in Teaching English and Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics from De La Salle University Manila, Philippines. Presently, she is an Associate Professor and the Dean of the Graduate School at Jose Rizal Memorial State University, where she teaches both in the undergraduate

and graduate levels. Her research interests include language teaching, language testing and assessment, linguistics, Philippine languages, and sociolinguistics.

Office of the Graduate School
Jose Rizal Memorial State University-Main Campus
Gov. Guading Adasa St., Santa Cruz, Dapitan City, Philippines 1701
am.mamhot.arbon@gmail.com

Jerico Juan Esteron has a B.A. and M.A. in Language and Literature from the University of the Philippines Baguio. He is currently a lecturer in the Department of English and Applied Linguistics, De La Salle University Manila, Philippines. He is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in English Studies at the University of the Philippines-Diliman. His research interests are within the areas of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics.

Department of English and Applied Linguistics
Brother Andrew Gonzalez FSC College of Education
1501 Andrew Gonzalez Hall
De La Salle University Manila
2401 Taft Avenue, Manila, Philippines 1004
jerico.esteron@dlsu.edu.ph

Zhang Kankan earned his doctoral title of Art in 2015 from Beijing Normal University. He is currently both a research assistant at the School of Media and Design, Ningbo Institute of Technology, Zhejiang University, China. His research interest in the field of education falls in teaching as research engine and class as a lab dish for future society.

Institute of Digital Media Arts
School of Media and Design
1 Xuefu Avenue, Yinzhou,
Ningbo, Zhejiang, China 315100
kenacademic@sina.com

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Appendix A

Scripted Grammar Lesson

Good morning, class. In today's grammar lesson we are going to take a look at another very common verb form that is used in English. It is the present progressive. This verb tense is very simple to form, and its common meaning is very easy to use. We'll see, though, that there are some less common—but still important—uses for present progressive.

Okay, let's start with the form of the present progressive. It's easy. The present progressive is made by using the verb BE, followed by the base form of another verb plus ING.

BE verb, remember, changes depending on the sentence subject that you are using. For example, we say I AM, but YOU ARE. The third person form of BE is IS if the subject is singular, and ARE if the subject is plural. So we have HE IS, SHE IS, and IT IS. Names of people and objects can be singular subjects, too. MIKE IS, ANNA IS. Plural subjects would be something like THE DOGS ARE or THE STUDENT AND THE TEACHER ARE.

Moving to the other half of the present progressive form, what do we mean by base form of the verb plus ING? The base form is the form that we find in the dictionary. It's the simple form. It doesn't have tense, like past tense, and it doesn't have number, like a plural form. It's the plain verb. Examples would be TALK, WRITE, SLEEP, COOK, and so on.

If we put these parts together, then, we have the fully formed present progressive tense. I AM WRITING A LETTER, YOU ARE COOKING BREAKFAST, THE DOGS ARE SLEEPING OUTSIDE, THE STUDENT AND THE TEACHER ARE TALKING IN THE CLASSROOM.

The CATESOL Journal 14.1. 2002

Appendix B

EFL Learners' Perceptions of an Effective EFL Teacher Questionnaire

Dear Respondent,

We are **Alice Mae M. Arbon**, **Jerico Juan Esteron**, and **Zhang Kankan** doing a research on English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners' perceptions of an effective EFL teacher. As we feel the need to enrich our research, we would like to ask for your insights and opinions by answering our survey.

In accomplishing this survey, you will first listen to a recorded grammar lesson. After which, you will answer the questions that follow. Rest assured that your answers will be kept confidential. Should you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact any of us. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

(Sgd.) **Alice Mae M. Arbon** – am.mamhot.arbon@gmail.com

(Sgd.) **Jerico J. Esteron** – jerico.esteron@dlsu.edu.ph

(Sgd.) **Zhang Kankan** – kenacademic@sina.com

Name (Invisible in report): _____

Male Female

No. of years studying English (formal lessons taken): _____

Please put a check (√) on the space before your answer.

1. Would you be able to learn a lot from this teacher?

YES NO

Follow-up question: What are the possible factors that affected your answer in Question #1? (Answer as many as applicable)

my perception of the teacher's pronunciation of words

my perception of the teacher's grammar

my perception of the teacher's speed in speaking

my perception of the teacher's intonation

I think the teacher has sufficient teaching experience

I think the teacher knows the subject/lesson

Others, please specify: _____

2. Would you be comfortable being a student of this teacher?

YES NO

Follow-up question: What are the possible factors that affected your answer in Question #2? (Answer as many as applicable)

my perception of the teacher's pronunciation of words

my perception of the teacher's grammar

my perception of the teacher's speed in speaking

my perception of the teacher's intonation

I think the teacher has sufficient teaching experience

I think the teacher knows the subject/lesson

Others, please specify: _____

3. Would you hire this teacher to give you private lessons/tutor in English?

Yes, definitely

No

4. I think that the teacher in the recording is a native speaker of English.

Yes, definitely

No

5. In 300-500 words, describe your idea of an effective English teacher.