The Attitudes of ESL Students Towards Nonnative English Language Teachers

Lucie Moussu
Purdue University, USA

George Braine
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Although no reliable statistics are available on the number of English language teachers worldwide, there is little doubt that the majority of them are nonnative speakers of English. Over the past few years, issues relating to Nonnative English Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) have received increasing attention in the field of English language teaching. In fact, TESOL, Inc. now has a caucus focused on NNEST issues.

Research about NNESTs is a recent phenomenon. This may be due to the unusually sensitive status of these teachers, silently viewed as second in knowledge and performance compared to Native English Speaking Teachers of English (NESTs).[1] While the authority of the native speakers is accepted as the norm in English speaking countries, there appears to be power struggles between expatriate NESTs and local NNESTs in non-English speaking contexts (i.e., see Canagarajah, 1999). Until recently, NNESTs may have been a topic too politically incorrect to be studied and discussed openly.

Despite the pioneering work of Medgyes (1992, 1994), which was conducted in Europe, it took nearly a decade for more research to emerge on issues relating to NNESTs, especially in North America. This paper describes a longitudinal study of ESL students' attitudes towards NNESTs.

Background

A few studies, notably those of Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999) and Inbar (2001), have investigated the self-perceptions of Nonnative English Speaking Teachers (NNESTs). Research on students' attitudes towards these teachers, at least as crucial as NNESTs' self-perceptions, has a more recent history.

[1]This may have originated with the Commonwealth Conference on the Teaching of English as a Second Language, held in 1962. One of the key tenets of the conference was that "the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker" (see Phillipson, 1992).

One of the earliest studies, Liang (2002), conducted at California State University in the US, was designed to investigate the attitudes of ESL students towards the speech of ESL teachers. The students listened to audio recordings delivered by six teachers and ranked the teachers' accents according to a scale of preference. Five of the teachers were NNESTs from different language backgrounds and the other was a Native English Speaking Teacher (NEST). Results showed that although the students rated pronunciation/accent in the teachers' speech as very important, they held generally positive attitudes toward these teachers, and believed that pronunciation/accent was not as relevant as they had first thought. Further, professional features depicted in the teachers' speech, such as "being interesting," "being prepared," "being qualified," and "being professional," played a role in the students' preference for teachers. In conclusion, Liang suggests that instead of focusing on ESL teachers' language background, the discussion on NNESTs should focus on their level of professionalism.

Although a large number of NNESTs work in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, many more teach in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). However, there appears to be a dearth of research into students' attitudes towards NNESTs in EFL contexts. To date, Cheung's (2002) research conducted in Hong Kong appears to be the only such study. Cheung's objectives were to determine the attitudes of university students in Hong Kong towards NESTs and NNESTs, the strengths and weaknesses of these teachers from the perspective of students, and the capability of these teachers in motivating the students to learn English. She also attempted to determine if there was any discrimination against NNESTs.

Cheung (2002) triangulated her data collection with the use of questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, and post-classroom interviews. The respondents were 420 randomly selected undergraduates from a variety of majors at seven universities in Hong Kong, and 22 university English language teachers. About 60% of these teachers were NESTs, and nearly 90% of them had lived in Hong Kong for more than 6 years. Results showed that high proficiency in English, the ability to use English functionally, and an awareness of the cultures of English speaking countries were the strengths observed in NESTs. For NNESTs, the ability to empathize with students as fellow second language learners, shared cultural background, and the emphasis they placed on grammar were seen as strengths. As for teacher competency, both students and teachers stated that English language teachers, irrespective of NEST or NNEST status, should be well-informed about the language, able to make learning relevant and fun, good at motivating students, able to encourage independent learning and thinking, sensitive and responsive to students' needs, and able to respect students as individuals with their own aspirations. Not all students and teachers were of the opinion that there was discrimination against NNESTs in Hong Kong.

Another study into students' perceptions was conducted by Mahboob (2004) at Indiana University in Bloomington in the US. Mahboob examined students' perceptions of NNESTs using the novel and insightful discourse-analytic technique, asking 32 students enrolled in an intensive English program to provide written responses to a cue that solicited their opinions on NEST and NNESTs. Four readers coded and classified the students' comments according to linguistic factors, teaching styles and methodology, and personal factors. The analysis of these comments showed that in the case of NESTs, the majority of positive comments related to oral skills, with vocabulary and culture also being viewed positively. Negative comments on NESTs were related to grammar, experience as an ESL learner, ability to answer questions, and methodology. In the case of NNESTs, experience as an ESL learner earned the most number of positive comments, followed by grammar, affect, oral skills, methodology, hard work, vocabulary, culture, ability to answer questions, and literacy skills. NNESTs received negative comments with regard to oral skills and culture.

In ESL contexts, most English language programs are self-funded, depending almost entirely on the number of fee-paying students they enroll and in their ability to retain these students. In the US, for example, more than 570,000 international students are enrolled in colleges and universities (Institute of International Education, 2004), and a significant number of these students take courses in Intensive English Programs (IEPs), either in preparation for university entrance or as a supplementary requirement for degree study. However, a study by Mahboob, Uhrig, Newman, and Hartford (2004) showed that the proportion of NNESTs in these IEPs is startlingly low. In the 118 IEPs surveyed, fewer than 8% of the teachers were NNESTs. Nearly 70% of the program administrators indicated that the "native English speaker" criterion was a factor in hiring decisions. The administrators' hiring practices, in turn, could reflect the perceived preferences of international students for NESTs. This preference, although unsubstantiated by research, prevails in EFL contexts.

Hence, more studies on the attitudes of ESL students towards NNESTs appear to be needed. Do NNESTs have a place in IEPs? Do ESL students have a preference to be taught by NESTs? Although the studies by Liang (2002), Cheung (2002), and Mahboob (2004) provide useful information on ESL students' perceptions of NNESTs, they provide little insights on the students' attitude changes after being taught by these teachers. The study reported in this paper attempts to fill this gap and was thus guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the attitudes and expectations of ESL students at the beginning of the semester towards NNESTs?

2. What teacher and student variables influence the students' attitudes towards their teachers at the beginning of the semester?
3. How do time and exposure to NNESTs influence the students' attitudes to these teachers?

Method

Participants

The study was conducted at the English Language Center (ELC) of a major university in Utah, in the US. During the semester in which the study was conducted, 88 students were registered in the seven classes taught by four NNESTs. The students came from 21 countries with the majority being from Asia (41.23%) and Latin America (32.98%). The participating students were in their first, second, or third semester at the ELC, a semester being 14 weeks. The ELC has six levels, Level 1 representing the lowest proficiency level and Level 6 the highest proficiency level. Nearly half of the participants (46.6%) were at level three, 15% were at Level 4, and 38.4% were at Level 5. No students from Levels 1, 2, or 6 participated because no NNESTs were teaching at these levels. The students' ages ranged from 17 to 53, with 34.5% of them being between the ages of 17 and 20. As for gender, 42.9% of the students were males and 57.1% females.

Although they were not research subjects, a brief introduction to the four NNESTs whose students participated in this study is relevant here. Their pseudonyms are related to their country of origin: Mr. J. was from Japan, Ms. A. was from Argentina, Ms. S. was from Switzerland, and Ms. E. was from Ecuador. All had been teaching at the ELC for more than one semester. The first three were teaching grammar classes, while the latter, Ms. E., was teaching two listening/speaking classes. The teaching experience and English backgrounds of these teachers varied but all four had TESOL degrees and had been living in the US for more than three years.

Instruments

The questionnaire used for this study was based on a review of the literature, current literature on attitude survey research (Brown, 2001; Schuman & Presser 1996; Weisberg et al., 1996), and a questionnaire used by Fox (1992) in her study of undergraduate opinions and attitudes towards international teaching assistants at a US university. Additionally, a pilot study that included 34 students and two NNESTs provided feedback on the appropriateness of the questions.

The questionnaire contained three distinct sections to measure the dependent variable, students' perceptions of their NNESTs; demographic information (first language of the students, age, etc.); opinions about and past experiences with NNESTs in general; and questions about the students' current teachers. All non-demographic items had a five-point Likert scale response format (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) to provide the participants with a single frame of reference in choosing their answers (Weisberg, Krosnick, & Bowen, 1996).

To ensure comprehension, the questionnaire was translated into the five languages spoken most commonly at the ELC, namely Spanish, Chinese (Mandarin), Portuguese, Korean, and Japanese. However, because of the small number of speakers of languages such as Armenian, Arabic, Thai, German, French, and Mongolian, the questionnaires were not translated into these languages. Consequently, 10 of the 97 questionnaires gathered were filled out in English.

Procedures

Once permission was granted by school administrators and teachers' consent was obtained, two questionnaires were administered to students. The initial questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the semester and the final one was given at the end of the semester, so that the effects of time, if any, would emerge more clearly. To ensure anonymity, the questionnaires were administered by an outsider, and individual teachers did not have access to the data collected.

At the beginning of the semester, 97 completed questionnaires were collected, and at the end of the semester, 95 questionnaires were collected since some students were transferred to different classes or had left the ELC. Similarly, since the ELC students are usually taught by four different teachers every day (NESTs and NNESTs), a few students filled out the questionnaires twice. Because of these small numbers, the significance level of the p value was set at $<.05$.

Analysis

The initial questionnaire was first analyzed to obtain frequencies and percentages for every question using the multiple choice and Likert scale formats. Then, ANOVAs were applied to determine how much of the variations within the means could be attributed to the different variables (gender, first language, etc.). Finally, results on the initial and final questionnaires were compared with a t test to look at the probability for two means being the same on matched questions, and to analyze the influence of time and exposure on the responses of the students.

Limitations

One major limitation of this study is the narrow range of ESL learners represented by the participants. Since only one school participated in the study, not all levels of proficiency were represented and some language groups were much smaller than others. Similarly, only four nonnative teachers participated, who were quite similar in their English proficiency, training, and teaching experience. Had these been more diverse, the influence of variables such as the accent or the appearance of the nonnative teachers could have been studied more precisely. Finally, although the participating teachers had not seen the questionnaires used for this study, they knew what the study researched. There is thus a possibility that their teaching methods might have been influenced by the study.

Results

The results are classified according to the three research questions.

1. *What were the attitudes and expectations of ESL students at the beginning of the semester towards NNESTs?*

The attitudes and expectations were overall very positive. On the first day of class, a total of 68.6% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they could indeed learn English just as well from a NNEST, while only 11.63% disagreed and 3.49% of the students strongly disagreed with this statement.

Furthermore, 73.17% of the students disagreed with the statement that "NNESTs have difficulties understanding and responding to their students," and only 7.3% of the students agreed or strongly agreed with the idea that it would be better if NNESTs were "not allowed to teach ESL." In addition, 82.14% of the students agreed that "NNESTs have as much authority in the classroom as NESTs," while only 5.95% of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

At the same time, 79.28% expressed admiration and respect for their NNESTs, and as many as 84.34% of the students expected their class with NNESTs to be a positive experience in general. When asked, on the first day of class and without really knowing their teacher, if they respected their new teacher, a total of 79.27% of the students agreed or strongly agreed and only 7.22% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Although 78.57% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that having a NNEST was a good opportunity to learn about the different cultures of the world, 39.02% did not agree with the statement that NNESTs knew as much about the culture of the US as NESTs, and 35.37% responded that they were unsure about NNESTs' knowledge of US culture (see Figure 1).

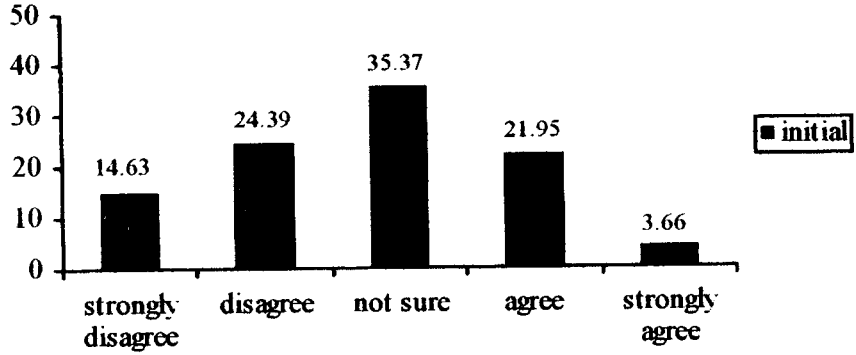

Figure 1[2]: "I think that NNESTs do not know as much about the US culture as NESTs" (initial n=82; final n=80)

Similarly, when asked if they would recommend this teacher to one of their friends on the first day of class, 56.79% answered that they would, 40.74% said that they were not sure, and only 2.46% said no. Finally, to the statement "I expect this class to be a positive experience in general," 84.34% of the students agreed or strongly agreed, 12.05% said that they were not sure yet, and only 3.61% disagreed. Likewise, to the statement. "I feel that this teacher will be a good teacher for me," 74.08% of the students agreed or strongly agreed, 23.46% said that they were not sure yet, only 2.47% disagreed, and no one strongly disagreed.

2. *What teacher and student variables influenced the students' perceptions of their teachers at the beginning of the semester?*

Because the reactions of a Japanese student to a Japanese teacher would probably differ from that of a Mexican student (due to factors such as common ethnic identity, familiarity with accents, and shared culture), two variables that were judged to have a possible influence on the results were identified: the first language of the students and that of the individual teachers. These variables were introduced into the analysis of the responses to all the questions of the initial and final questionnaires. Caution must be used when looking at these results since not all language groups were the same size.

[2]Only the answers that are statistically significant (p value: <.0001) are discussed here.

First language of the students. When looking at how students from different language groups answered individually, it was noticed that Korean students had a tendency to express negative feelings toward their NNESTs more frequently than other language groups.

To the statement "A NNEST has as much authority in the classroom as a NEST," the answers given by various language groups were significantly different (see Table 1). The Korean students disagreed with the statement significantly more than the other groups, in particular the Portuguese-speaking students, who very strongly agreed.

Table 1

Means Per Language Group on "A NNEST Has as Much Authority in the Classroom as a NEST" (N = 83)

Language Group	**Mean**	**Standard Error**
Portuguese (Brazil)	4.95	0.26
Japanese	4.88	0.21
Spanish	4.76	0.15
Chinese	4.45	0.31
Korean	2.68	0.23
Other Languages	4.05	0.25

Note: p value <.0001

Responses to the statement "I respect and admire this new teacher because he/she is a NNEST," indicated that again, the views of the Korean students were significantly more negative than those of other language groups (see Table 2). Interestingly, the Japanese more often displayed a stronger similarity of opinion with the Latin speakers than with their Asian counterparts, the Chinese or Koreans.

Table 2

Means Per Language Group on "I Respect and Admire this New Teacher Because He/she is a NNEST" (N = 81)

Language Group	Mean	Standard Error
Chinese	4.55	0.37
Japanese	4.47	0.23
Spanish	4.46	0.17
Portuguese	4.20	0.29
Korean	2.71	0.26
Other Languages	4.16	0.27

Note: p value <.0001

The responses to the statement "I expect this class to be a positive experience in general" are also interesting. The *p* value of <.0031 and the means again show that the Chinese (mean: 3.11) and the Koreans (mean: 4.00) were far more hesitant about their teachers than the Spanish (mean: 4.59), the Japanese (mean: 4.59), and the Portuguese (mean: 4.37) who were very positive already.

Differences between the teachers. It seemed important to verify if the students had generalized feelings towards all NNESTs in general, or if they would make judgments based on individual differences of the teachers. However, overall, responses were not significantly different depending on their teacher, except on three particular questions about respect (the two Spanish-speaking teachers gaining the most respect), accent, and appearance (Mr. J. being recognized as having the strongest accent and most foreign appearance).

When the students were asked if they admired their teacher because he or she was a NNEST, the *p* value of <.0057 indicates that students in different classes differed slightly in their responses, with the students of Ms. E. (mean: 4.60) and Ms. A. (mean: 4.13) agreeing strongly with the statement and the other students being more unsure.

3. *How do the variables of time and exposure to NNESTs influence the students' perceptions of their teachers?*

The variables of time and exposure did not seem to make much of a difference, as can be seen in Figure 2, even though the responses to some questions were significantly different at the beginning and at the end of the semester.

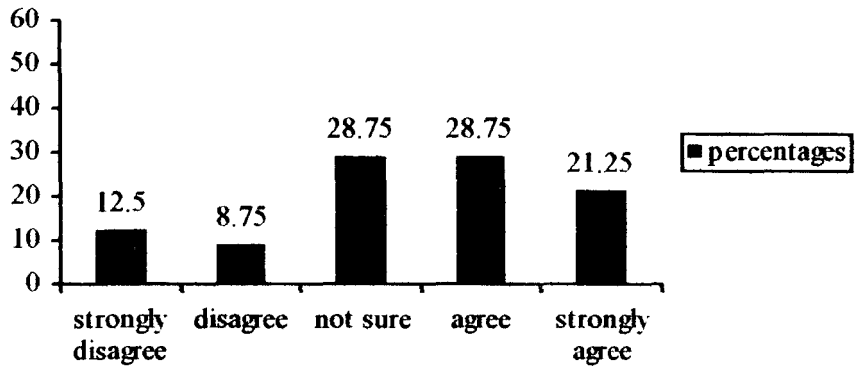

Figure 2: "My feelings towards my NNEST have changed during the semester." (N = 80)

This lack of significant change over time may be due to several factors. First, the participating students already had positive opinions of their teacher at the beginning of the semester and in this case, it is good that their opinions did not change. For example, the answers to the question "I expect this class to be a positive experience" were already very positive at the beginning of the semester (54.22% of the students strongly agreed), and showed only a very slight (but still positive) increase at the end of the semester as evidenced by answers to the question "This class was a positive experience" (55.56% strongly agreed).

A similar pattern appeared on the question "I feel that this teacher will be a good teacher for me," and "I feel that this teacher was a good teacher for me" (see Figure 3).

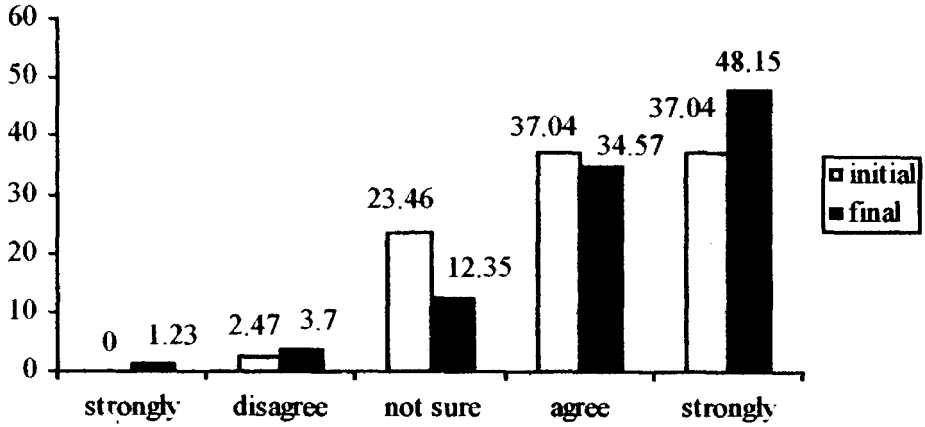

Figure 3: "I feel that this teacher will be a good teacher for me" (N = 81) and "I feel that this teacher was be a good teacher for me." (N = 81)

Even if not strongly obvious elsewhere, the effects of time and exposure were most positively noticeable in the answers given to the following question "Would you encourage a friend to take a class with THIS NNEST?" (see Figure 4). To this question, while already 56.78% of the students had answered yes at the beginning of the semester, 76.25% of them answered yes at the end.

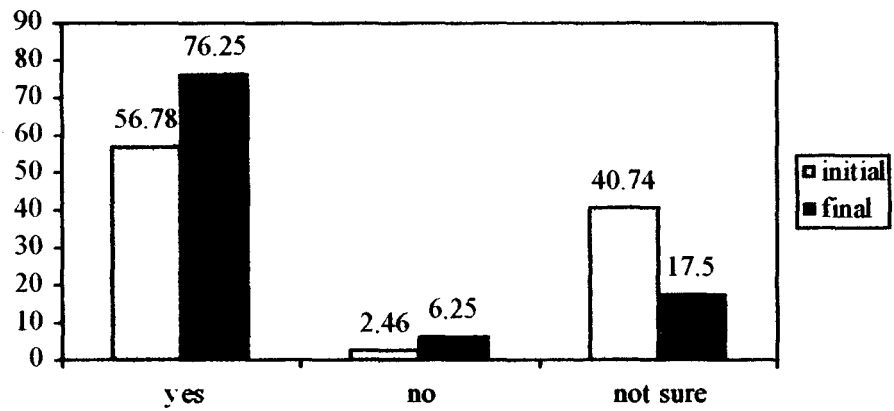

Figure 4: "Would you encourage a friend to take a class with THIS NNEST?" (initial: N = 82; final: N = 80)

It is hoped that with a larger pool of participants and in different schools, time would have made a more significant difference.

Discussion

Overall, the students appear to have had a positive attitude towards their NNESTs at the beginning of the semester. Most students agreed that NNESTs had as much authority in the classroom as NESTs, that they respected and admired their teacher, that they would recommend this teacher to their friends, that they expected the class would be a positive experience, and that the teacher would be good for them. Most students also disagreed with the statements that NNESTs had difficulties in understanding and responding to their students and that they should not be allowed to teach ESL. From the students' viewpoint, the only negative aspect of the NNESTs was their lesser level of knowledge about US culture. This, however, is not surprising. Language is closely intertwined with culture, and a teacher's familiarity with the local culture is a distinct advantage in the classroom. What the students' negative response also shows is that they were thoughtful and honest in their responses, and carefully read the questionnaire items.

Considering the varied national and linguistics backgrounds of the students, these findings appear to be remarkable. The students were from 21 countries and spoke a variety of languages. Despite the fact that they had all come to the US for an expensive higher education, where they may have been expecting to be taught by "American" (Caucasian, native-English speaker) ESL teachers, they were on the whole positive in their attitudes towards and expectations of their NNESTs. This indicates that they may have already had positive experiences with NNESTs in their home countries, which bodes well for the quality of English teaching in the countries represented by these students. Braine (1999), Thomas (1999), and Lee (2000) recount negative experience with ESL students at IEPs in the US in the 1980s, such as students requesting a transfer out of or avoiding classes taught by a NNEST, or publicly embarrassing the NNEST. Although these may have been isolated incidents, the attitudes of most students in this study are in contrast, many actually expecting their class with a NNEST to be a positive experience.

In terms of teacher and student variables that influenced the students' perceptions of their teachers at the beginning of the semester, some findings are noteworthy. First, Korean and Chinese students tended to have more negative attitudes towards NNESTs. For example, in wanting to move to another class (presumably taught by a NEST), the Chinese students indicated a wish twice as strong as the Spanish and Portuguese students. This cannot be attributed to an "Asian" attitude or value because the Japanese

students in the sample displayed a more positive attitude towards NNESTs, an attitude that was in line with those from Spanish and Portuguese-speaking backgrounds.

The probable causes for this clear division among the students can be multiple. Do Asian students tend to give harsher judgments, while the Spanish and Brazilian students are more tolerant and forgiving? It could also have been that the Chinese group, being quite small compared to the Spanish group, in particular, may have been in one teacher's class. Whatever the reason, the patterns shown here have clearly demonstrated that the first language of the students is a significant and crucial variable. While it is regrettable that no deeper analysis was possible, the above discussion demonstrates that more research must be done in this area, not only with additional students but also with other NNESTs from different countries and language backgrounds.

Another noteworthy fact is that the students from different national/linguistic backgrounds responded differently when asked if they admired and respected their teacher because of his/her being a nonnative. One possible explanation is that because the majority of the students were from Latin America, they most admired and respected the two teachers who were also from Latin America. Further, these two teachers may have been excellent role models for the many Latin American students.

The final research question was related to the effects of time and exposure on students' attitudes towards NNESTs. As shown in the results section, the students began with a positive attitude, which tended to increase during the 14-week semester. For instance, at the beginning of the semester, 74.08% of the students stated that they felt that the teacher would be good for them. This increased positively to 82.72% by the end of the semester. As for recommending their NNEST to a friend, the positive response increased even more, from 56.78% at the beginning of the semester to 76.25% by the end.

Conclusion

This study supports the findings of Liang (2002), Cheung (2002), and Mahboob (2003) in that, overall, students held positive attitudes towards the NNESTs in their home countries as well as in the US. However, the most important finding of this study is that the students' attitudes towards their NNESTs increased positively over time.

These findings, although representing only a small group of students from one school, are encouraging in the context of TESOL, Inc.'s policy formulated in 1992, which emphasizes the need for "minimal language proficiency standards that may be applied equally to all ESOL teachers without reference to the nativeness of their English" (p. 23). Indeed, the responses by the students regarding authority, respect, and knowledge show a high degree of support of their nonnative teachers.

As noted earlier, the percentage of NNESTs employed in IEPs is quite low (Mahboob et al., 2004). According to some administrators of these IEPs, the "native English speaker" criterion was a factor in hiring decisions, probably because of the widely held assumption that fee-paying ESL students may prefer to be taught by NESTs, an assumption now challenged by the results of this study. These results should encourage program administrators to hire more NNESTs, so that the linguistic diversity seen among the students in these IEPs could be better reflected among the teachers, and language expertise and teaching ability are given more prominence than native speaker status.

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About the Authors

Lucie Moussu received a Master's degree in TESOL from Brigham Young University, in Utah, and is now a Ph.D candidate in ESL at Purdue University, in Indiana. Her research interests include nonnative English speaking teachers, teacher education, and IEP administration.

George Braine teaches at the English Department of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He directs the university's Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program and the MA program in Applied English Linguistics.