# U.S. Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions of Their Non-native English Speaking Instructor

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify U.S. undergraduate pre-service elementary and early childhood teachers' perceptions of their non-native English speaking (NNES) content area instructor. The question for this study was: In what ways do pre-service teachers' perception of their NNES literacy course instructor change after a semester-long course? Twenty-three pre-service teachers answered a before-course and an after-course questionnaire about their perceptions of having a NNES instructor. Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected and analyzed. Findings suggest that pre-service teachers were concerned with the idea of a possible language barrier, but once this became a non-issue, pre-service teachers appreciated the instructor's experience as a language learner.

*Keywords:* U.S. pre-service teachers, teacher education, native English speaker (NES), non-native English speaker (NNES), teacher perception

## Introduction

Ann is a pre-service teacher in an early childhood teacher education program at a U.S. southern university. She is 20 years old, Caucasian, with no teaching experience, some experience with a non-native English speaking (NNES) instructor, and some experience working with a Spanish-speaking student in a preschool classroom. Ann is in her junior year and she is in her first semester of her teacher education program. During this semester, Ann has an NNES instructor as her literacy course professor.

Throughout this paper, I will use the terms of native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) as defined by Boecher (2005): "a person is a native speaker of the L1 [first language, one's native language] he or she grew up with." (p. 68); "Nonnative speakers, in contrast, are generally conceived as speakers of a language that is not their L1" (p. 68). With regard to teaching English specifically, I will use

NES and NNES (native and non-native English speaking, respectively). Authors in the field also use NEST and NNEST as acronyms for the noun phrases native and non-native English speaking teacher, respectively.

## A Review of Recent Research

Most of the research in the field of NNS instructors is centered on language teachers, specifically their teaching and their student perceptions, rather than on content area teachers. (A language teacher is defined as a teacher who is teaching language to second language learners and a content area teacher is a teacher who teaches content, such as a literature, history, or mathematics.) The difference between a language teacher and a content area teacher is the objectives they have: a language teacher focuses on language learning and proficiency, while a content area teacher focuses on content knowledge and skills. A NNS language teacher has the advantages of knowing the process and the challenges of language learning and being familiar what it means and feels like to be a language learner. A NNS language teacher is thus more sympathetic to his/her students, which is not a required skill for NNS content area teachers. In certain contexts, a NNS also may be a native speaker of the learners' L1, which can bring additional insights.

Because of their language learning experience, NNS instructors are often better suited than their monolingual NS counterparts to teach second or foreign languages, and often better equipped with knowledge and expertise about language learning, v due to their own experience as language learners (Llurda, 2004). NNS are "better learner models" (Medgyes, 2001, p. 436), but being a good learner model is not enough to be a good teacher. Regarding the teaching of English as a second language specifically, Medgyes wrote "Non-NESTs [non-native English speaking teachers] have amassed a wealth of knowledge about the English language during their own learning process" (2001, p. 437). In terms of differences between NES and NNES language instructors, the literature identified several aspects. NNESTs have a less extensive vocabulary than NESTs; tend to rely on textbook English rather than everyday English (Arva, 2000); often have more extensive knowledge about grammar and grammar rules than their monolingual NEST counterparts (Arva, 2000; Bernat, 2008); understand and have experience with the process of learning a language (Bernat, 2008; Ling & Braine, 2007; Maum, 2002); and have strong instructional skills (Florence Ma, 2012). On the

other hand, of course, NESTs have better English language competence than NNESTs (Medgyes, 2001; Florence Ma, 2012).

It is interesting that NNESTs were viewed from a 'deficit model' perspective (Bernat, 2008, p. 1) in which their language proficiency levels were considered less valuable than a NEST (Bernat, 2008); however, lately, NNES teachers' second language experience has been identified as a strength to language teaching (Bernat, 2008; Nemtchinova, 2005) and their cultural background as an asset for the content areas classrooms such as literature courses (Seloni, 2012). In addition, more recently, the goal of second language learning has changed from the native-like language proficiency ideal, to a model that takes into consideration the bilingualism of the speakers and their abilities (Valdez, Kibler, & Walqui, 2014).

Research on students' perceptions of their NNES teachers is a new area in need of more studies; there are fewer studies on students' perceptions of their NNES teachers than the number of studies on NNES teachers' self-perceptions (Braine, 2010). *Not a lot of research has been conducted on students' perceptions of their NNES instructors* (Moussu, 2010) and most research was conducted using self-reported data (Moussu & Llurda, 2008). For example, undergraduate business students thought their NNES instructors had good rapport with the class and had good content knowledge; however concerns about their teaching were raised: students felt their NNES instructors were not teaching as effectively as a NES instructor (Neves & Sanyal, 1991). Undergraduate students in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts seem to prefer NES instructors as their English teachers (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002) and previous experience with a NES instructor does not seem to influence students' preferences for a NES or NNES instructor (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002) .

Little research was conducted on NNES content area teachers at the university level (Liu & Jernigan, 2012) and this is where this study makes a contribution. This study looks at the perceptions of students (self-reported data), specifically undergraduate pre-service teachers, of their NNES content area instructor.

**Conceptual Framework**

This study draws upon the idea of guided participation and apprenticeship as described by Rogoff (1990). Children develop their cognitive, social, and cultural skills in a social context, surrounded and guided by adults who train them. The

apprenticeship Rogoff talked about refers to children's learning. For this study, the idea of apprenticeship and guided learning was extended to college students, specifically undergraduate pre-service teachers who were guided in their learning by their instructor, who had K-12 teaching experience. The course instructor acted like a mentor by providing pre-service teachers with various in-class activities that prepared them for their future classrooms. More specifically, the instructor of the course, an NNES herself, modeled and shared her experience as an NNES and as a teacher of English language learners (ELLs). Even though the instructor of the course was a content area teacher who taught content rather than language, her experience as a language teacher and language learner was shared during the course as part of the course content.

**Purposes of the Study**

The primary objective of this study was to identify undergraduate pre-service elementary and early childhood teachers' perception of their NNES literacy course instructor. The question for this study was: In what ways do pre-service teachers' perception of their NNES literacy course instructor change after one semester? The answer to this question might bring insight into how pre-service teachers identify, if at all, the qualities an NNES instructor brings to class, such as their language learning experience. As a secondary objective, this study was a self-study of the instructor. The question was: What qualities and actions of their NNES instructor, if any, did pre-service teachers identify as useful and relevant to their future careers? The answer to this question will allow the instructor to identify what she could highlight and share about her experience as an NNES and as a teacher of ELLs in future iterations of the course.

## Method

**Participants**

The context of the study was a semester-long required literacy course on developing first and second language literacy required for pre-service teachers in early childhood and elementary undergraduate programs at a small comprehensive university in the Southern region of the United States. The course met face-to-face mostly three times a week for 15 weeks, with some online asynchronous class ses-

sions. All pre-service teachers in two sections of the same literacy course, one section taught to early childhood and one to elementary pre-service teachers, were invited to be part of the study. The participants who volunteered were 23 pre-service teachers (see Table 1 for demographic information). The literacy course is offered to pre-service early childhood and elementary teachers in the first semester of the professional teacher education program. Before entering the professional teacher education program, education majors take two years of general education and content courses. At the time of the study, all but one of the participants was between the ages of 19 and 29.

*Table 1: Participants' demographic information*

| Education Major | Early childhood | 10 |
|---|---|---|
| | Elementary | 13 |
| Race/Ethnicity | Caucasian | 22 |
| | Mixed | 1 |
| Gender | Female | 20 |
| | Male | 3 |

At the time of the study, the instructor of the course (the author of this study) was a first year assistant professor with previous higher education teaching experience. The instructor is an NNES who taught the same literacy course in a previous semester at the same university. In addition to the higher education teaching experience, the instructor had worked as an English as a second language (ESL) teacher in U.S. K-12 public schools and as an EFL teacher overseas. In the context of the rising number of ELLs in US public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2014) where these pre-service teachers will work after graduation, the instructor of this literacy course focused not only on first and second language literacy development, but also on strategies of how to address ELL issues in the classroom.

**Procedures**

Participants in both sections of the course completed a before-course and an after-course questionnaire (see Appendix A). The instructor did not examine the data and the consent forms until semester grades were submitted. The before-course questionnaire included 11 questions in total, six multiple-choice and five open-ended. The questions asked about demographic information, education pro-

gram (early childhood or elementary), previous teaching experience, experience with NNES instructors, and perceived advantages and disadvantages of having an NNES instructor. The after-course questionnaire included three open-ended questions which asked about students' perceptions of having had a NNES as their course instructor. Thus the collected data for this study was both qualitative and quantitative.

The quantitative data is presented and organized using descriptive statistics. The qualitative data was organized and analyzed to identify common themes using an inductive process (Creswell, 2012). First, all qualitative data was organized in chronological order: before and after and was read and re-read several times to identify common themes. Then the data was analyzed to identify themes, patterns, and representative quotes for the findings.

## Results

The pre-service teachers from this study did not seem to have changed their perception of having an NNES instructor dramatically. Both before and after the course, the pre-service teachers mentioned that not understanding what their instructor said would be a disadvantage, which was not the case with their instructor (the author). The reason there does not seem to be a drastic change in perception might be that 16 out of 23 pre-service teachers had an NNES instructor before this course, and 16 out of 23 had worked or collaborated with a NNES before.

After the course, most pre-service teachers felt it was advantageous having had an NNES instructor because of the instructor's experience as a second language learner, which might be similar to the ELLs' language learning experience pre-service teachers might have in their own classrooms. NNES language teachers' experience as a language learner has been identified in the literature as a strength in the ESL classroom (e.g., Nemtchinova, 2005).

**Before Course Data**

**Advantages of an NNES instructor.** The before-course questionnaire qualitative data identifies two main advantages of an NNES instructor: 1) being from a different culture and 2) having second language learning experience to share (see Table 2).

*Table 2: Before class, advantages of an NNEST instructor*

| Being from a different culture | Having second language learning experience to share |
|---|---|
| "Learning another culture can help me in the future". (Emma) | "… she understands what people go through when learning a new language and can teach us how to teach others in that aspect". (Alice) |
| "They have a different background, different view". (Ann) | "You are interacting with a different culture and learning about it". (Ava) |

**Disadvantages of an NNES instructor.** In terms of disadvantages, the pre-service teachers identified language issues, more specifically problems with understanding what the instructor says because of the foreign accent. The word "understand" or "understanding" came up 12 times out of the 23 responses recorded, which might suggest that good communication and "understanding" is crucial for pre-service teachers when it comes to NNES instructors. Similar in meaning to "understand" or "understanding", one of the students used "comprehend" and two mentioned "accent". Three other participants referred to the idea of "language barrier". See Table 3 for some examples of the disadvantages mentioned.

*Table 3. Disadvantages of having an NNEST instructor in the before-course questionnaire*

| "May not understand me completely". (Lisa, early childhood) |
|---|
| "Maybe a language barrier if they don't speak English well." (Susan, early childhood) |
| "Sometimes it is hard to comprehend." (Isabella, elementary) |
| "Some trouble understanding/comprehending". (Madison, elementary) |

Three of the pre-service teachers (Sarah, Samantha, and Alice) did not identify any disadvantages of having a NNES as their instructor and these expectations might be due to their previous experience with NNESs. Surprisingly enough, Alice responded she had had no NNES instructors before, unlike Sarah and Samantha, yet she did not expect any disadvantages.

**After Course Data**

    **Advantages of the NNES instructor.** The pre-service teachers' comments about the advantages the instructor fell under two categories: 1) the instructor's second language learning experience and knowledge that was shared in class and 2) listening to a foreign accent. These two advantages are placed in the context of growing ELLs in the US classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), classrooms where these pre-service teachers will be working once they graduate. (See Table 4).

*Table 4. Advantages of having an NNEST instructor in the after-course questionnaire*

| Instructor's second language learning experience and knowledge that was shared in class | Listening to a foreign accent |
| --- | --- |
| "I think having a non-native English speaker as a professor was to our advantage. Dr. S. showed us both sides of a student's experience because she knows first-hand. I feel Dr. S. understands what a non-native speaker feels and thinks like therefore she could help us understand our ELL students better". (Mary, early childhood) | "I think one of the advantages was getting used to focusing on a different accent. … Another advantage is she knows first-hand the experiences of learning and becoming used to a second language". (Lisa, early childhood) |
| [this course on] literacy is based in ELL learners and literacy. Having a non-native English speaker as a professor was helpful because she had experience with learning English as a 2nd language. It was helpful because the professor was able to relate with the ELL learning experience. (Christen, early childhood) | I think it made the class much more interesting. It was still a normal class, but the fact she had an accent made it more interesting to listen. (Emma, elementary) |

    **Disadvantages of the NNES instructor.** After the course, a larger number of the participants (21 out of the 23) felt there were no disadvantages of having had a NNES as their instructor for the class. (Some participants offered additional comments related to minor issues.) For example, William noted: "I did not see any disadvantages at all. It would be different if you did not speak good English, but you do speak it very well." Emily said: "None. There were minor mishaps with speaking and spelling but we understood what she was getting across."

It is possible that some participants provided answers that they thought were expected of them.  For example, although Olivia's response on the after-course questionnaire reads: "I never felt a non-native English speaker had any disadvantages," on her before-course questionnaire she noted under disadvantages to having an NNES instructor: "Hard to understand."

Two out of the 23 pre-service teachers identified minor disadvantages of having a NNES as their instructor: "I do not think there were any disadvantages. Maybe in the beginning it was hard to understand the accent, but soon got used to it." (Lisa).  Another participant (Sofie) wrote: "I did not notice any major disadvantages. Only she sometimes got a little confused when she did not fully understand what we were talking about. However, she was not scared to ask us questions and I loved that." Both of these participants mentioned comprehension as being a minor disadvantage that was definitely overcome throughout the semester.

## Conclusions and Implications

The implications and conclusions for this study will be discussed in the light of the two objectives. The primary objective of the study was to identify the change in pre-service teachers' perceptions of their NNES instructor before and after the course.  Pre-service teachers in this study valued their NNES instructor's experience as a second language learner as it related to ELLs, who pre-service teachers thought they might have in their own classrooms. By hearing their instructor's experience as a second language learner, the pre-service teachers from this study had the opportunity to know how ELLs in public schools might feel or how ELLs might struggle with learning English. The idea of "intelligibility" seems to be central to the participants' thoughts and expectations about their NNES instructor. Once they noticed there was no real language barrier and that they "understood" the instructor, they could focus on other aspects and qualities their instructor had, such as her second language experience and diverse culture.

Using Rogoff's (1990) terms, by sharing her experience as a language learner, the instructor of this literacy course acted as a mentor to the pre-service teachers who were apprentices in the teaching profession by helping them think about ELLs' language learning process.

The participants in this study did not seem to perceive their NNES instructor from a "deficit model" perspective (Bernat, 2008, p. 1) once the issue of intelligi-

bility was taken care of, and perceived her second language experience and accent as preparation for their future teaching profession. This suggests that if communication with a NNES instructor is not an issue, college students are able to value what NNES instructors bring to the class. Interestingly, there was a comment that one of the participants made, which mentioned the idea of getting used to one's accent and way of speaking: "Maybe in the beginning it was hard to understand the accent, but I soon got used to it" (Lisa). This might suggest that pre-service teachers could benefit from getting used to accents and various ways of speaking English so they can be more comfortable with the ELLs in their classroom. In addition, the participants were able to specifically identify the advantages of having a NNES instructor who could share with them her experience as a language learner.

In terms of the secondary objective of the study (i.e., what NNES teacher qualities and actions, if any, were identified as relevant to pre-service teachers) the instructor learned that sharing her experience as a language learner was perceived as relevant and useful.

Before offering a concluding note, it should be mentioned here that there are limitations in the nature of the data of this study. The findings are based on self-reported data. Although the participants were assured that their answers would not affect their grade or their relationship with the instructor and that the data organization and analysis would be done after grades were submitted, it is still possible the participants answered with what they thought the instructor wanted to hear. Therefore, these findings could not be generalized to a larger population of pre-service teachers. In addition, the small number of participants warrants against a strong generalization of the findings.

As noted earlier, most of the research on NNES teachers focuses on language teachers rather than content teachers, thus the need for more studies which look at NNES instructors in content courses such as in colleges of education, business, or science. Larger numbers of students and various courses need to be studied to identify which experiences and qualities, if any, students perceive as relevant to their future profession. In the case of colleges of education, having NNES instructors makes a clear connection to the experiences that pre-service teachers will have in their classrooms, while for other professions the connections might not be as direct. However, in the context of an increased language diversity in the United States, one might suspect that having an NNES instructor could only be advantageous.

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## About the Author

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## Appendix A

### Non-native English Speaking Teacher (NNEST) Questionnaire

**Before Class Questionnaire:**

1.  Have you had a non-native English speaker as you professor or teacher be-fore?

    a.  Yes

    b.  No

If yes, please give details.

2. How do you expect having a non-native English speaker as your professor to be?

3. Do you have friends or family who are non-native English speakers?
   a. Yes
   b. No

If yes, please give details.

4. Have you worked, collaborated, or interacted with non-native English speakers before?
   a. Yes
   b. No

If yes, please give details.

5. What do you think are the advantages of having a non-native English speaker as your professor?

6. What do you think are the disadvantages of having a non-native English speaker as your professor?

7. How many years of teaching experience do you have?

8. How old are you?

9. How do you identify yourself?
   a) African-American
   b) White
   c) Hispanic (Latino)
   d) Asian
   e) Mixed

10. Gender:
    a) Female
    b) Male

11. Do you already have a teaching licensure?
    a) Yes
    b) No

If yes, please mention the content area.

**After Class Questionnaire:**

1. What do you think were the advantages of having a non-native English speaker as your professor this semester?

2. What do you think were the disadvantages of having a non-native English speaker as your professor this semester?

3. After taking a class from a non-native English speaker professor, what would you tell a friend who did not take a class from a non-native English speaker?