

Qualitative Exploration of EFL Students' Preferred Instructional Approaches by Native and Non-Native English Teachers

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Abstract

The ongoing argument about the effectiveness of Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) versus Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) raises critical questions about students' preferences and the factors shaping their learning experiences. This study explores 10th-grade English as Foreign Language (EFL) students' preferences for teaching approaches employed by NESTs and NNESTs. Using a qualitative research design, the study employed thematic analysis to examine data collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and structured interviews with 10 high school students experienced with both NESTs and NNESTs. Findings indicate that students preferred NESTs for clarity of explanation, pronunciation correction, and interactive activities, such as games and group work, which fostered engagement and independent learning. NNESTs, on the other hand, were valued for their structured reliance on course materials and relatable motivational stories. These preferences highlight complementary strengths, suggesting that a balanced integration of both teaching styles could enhance English language learning. The study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the role of native-speaker-ism in English education and calls for teacher training programs that emphasize the unique strengths of NESTs and NNESTs. Future research should include teacher perspectives and observational data for a more comprehensive analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the debate surrounding the performance of native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) versus non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) has gained significant attention in the field of English language education. One significant phenomenon in this debate is the widespread preference for NESTs

despite the growing number of highly qualified NNESTs. A global survey conducted by British Council revealed that around 70% of English learners across various regions still perceive NESTs as more qualified language instructors and higher in status than NNESTs (Copland et al., 2016, pp 72), particularly when it comes to pronunciation and oral fluency instruction. This trend, observed in various educational surveys, highlights a critical need to understand the factors driving these preferences.

Different teaching approaches employed by native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) are often preferred by students in varying ways. These preferences may be influenced by various factors, such as teaching style (Song, 2024), cultural background (Colmenero & Lasagabaster, 2024), and the way each group approaches language instruction (Deng, 2024). While some students might appreciate the fluency and natural language use of native speakers, others may prefer the structured and empathetic approach of non-native speakers, who often have firsthand experience with the challenges of learning English as a second or even foreign language (Nigar, 2024, pp 206). This diversity in teaching preferences highlights the importance of recognizing the strengths both NESTs and NNESTs bring to the classroom.

Native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) are those who grew up speaking English as their first language, usually from countries where English is the main language. They often have a natural feel for the language, including pronunciation, and expressions (Prayogi & Widiyati, 2024; Punyaporn, 2024). They also bring cultural knowledge that can help students understand how the language is used in real life (Colmenero & Lasagabaster, 2024). Non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), on the other hand, learned English as a second language or as a foreign language. They have gone through the language learning process themselves, so they often understand the challenges students face (Nauryzbayeva, 2024). This experience allows them to explain grammar and language rules clearly and offer helpful strategies for learning. Many NNESTs also speak more than one language, which can be an advantage when teaching (Medgyes, 2001).

Current studies on students' preferences for teaching approaches suggest that native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) are often favored for speaking and pronunciation practice, while non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) are preferred for grammar and vocabulary instruction (Fitria, 2023). However, Beverborg and Müller (2023) found no clear preference between native and non-native

teachers, as both were rated similarly in personal and content evaluations, with no significant differences in how students assessed their assignments. This indicates that students prioritize teaching quality over the teacher's language background. Similarly, a study by Deng et al. (2024) showed that Chinese students perceive both NESTs and NNESTs as effective in different ways—NESTs were seen as more engaging and caring, while NNESTs were viewed as more knowledgeable and skilled. Students' motivation positively influenced their perceptions of both teacher types, though the effect was stronger for NESTs, likely due to native-speaker-ism.

Existing research highlights general tendencies—such as students' preferences for NESTs in speaking and pronunciation and for NNESTs in grammar instruction. However, these studies often lack qualitative insight into the underlying reasons for these preferences, particularly among mid-teen students, as mid-teens have already built a foundation in their second language and are more aware of their learning needs (Dalan, 2023). In high school, effective English learning requires structured, precise teaching methods to support mid-teens, who now possess the cognitive capacity to critically assess instructional approaches and are part of an education system increasingly focused on building critical thinking skills for growing sector demands (Kebede & Kitila, 2023; Tikiawati et al., 2024). Responding to this gap, this study focuses on 10th-grade EFL students, aiming to understand their specific preferences for instructional approaches used by NESTs and NNESTs and how these preferences shape their learning experiences.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design, chosen to explore students' attitudes, behaviors, and experiences in depth through methods like Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and interviews (Dawson, 2002). The focus is on examining 10th-grade students' preferences for instructional approaches used by native and non-native English-speaking teachers.

Participants

This study involved 10 high school students from the tenth grade, selected through purposive sampling based on their experience with both native and non-native English teachers. The decision to include 10 participants was made to keep discussions manageable while capturing diverse perspectives. A small sample size

was chosen to facilitate rich qualitative insights, aligning with recommendations for qualitative studies (Creswell, 2013).

Recruiting participants was challenging, especially in making sure they joined voluntarily and had experience with both native and non-native teachers. To address ethical concerns, we got permission from both students and their English teacher. Participants were assured that their information would be kept private and that they could leave the study at any time without any consequences.

Data Collection

The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions were conducted in a quiet classroom setting to encourage open and candid discussion. Each session followed a structured protocol, with the researcher using an audio recording device and a note-taking guide to capture responses systematically. Following the FGDs, individual interviews are held with each student to gain further insight into their reasons for specific views on teaching approaches. In these interviews, the researcher reads each question from a structured questionnaire—adapted from the instruments of Alseweed (2012) and Brown (2013), and grounded in foundational research by Medgyes (1992). This approach ensured a structured yet flexible discussion, allowing students to elaborate on their experiences and preferences.

Since this study relies on students' self-reports, the results may be influenced by personal or cultural biases. Without classroom observations or teacher input, the findings may not fully reflect real classroom situations. Future research could include these aspects for a better understanding of teaching methods.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis, a qualitative approach for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within data, guided the analysis process, following the principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021). The process involved familiarizing oneself with the data, conducting open coding, constructing themes, reviewing and naming them, and producing the final report. This method emphasized recurring themes and notable contrasts in instructional techniques used by native and non-native teachers, with the goal of aligning findings with items from the structured questionnaire. Through this approach, the analysis provides a clearer and deeper understanding of students' instructional preferences and insights into their perceptions of various teaching approaches.

RESULT

The analysis reveals three major themes: *teaching effectiveness and student comprehension, learning engagement and classroom interaction, and teacher's personal and professional qualities*. Sub-themes for teaching effectiveness and student comprehension include clarity of explanation, error correction and language accuracy, and reliance on course material. Learning engagement and classroom interaction is divided into encouragement of independent learning; group and pair work activities, and the use of games and innovative strategies. Finally, teacher's personal and professional qualities encompass motivation and encouragement, adaptability and creativity, and role model perception. Each theme is presented as follows:

1. Teaching Effectiveness and Student Comprehension

Three sub-themes illustrate students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness and their comprehension in class: clarity of explanation, error correction and language accuracy, and reliance on course material.

The *clarity of explanation* plays a key role in students' understanding. The native teacher's expressive use of gestures and body language helps students follow the content more easily, especially when explaining difficult concepts. One student shared, "*When the Native Teacher explains about the lesson, she uses expression and it makes her explanation clearly understandable. She also uses body language, and it gets our imagination to what she meant.*"

In addition to clarity, *error correction and language accuracy* are essential aspects of effective teaching. Students appreciate the native teacher's consistent correction of pronunciation, which helps them internalize the correct sounds. Although both native and non-native teachers focus less on grammar, the native teacher's superior pronunciation aids in language acquisition. As one student noted, "*When we made mistakes, for example in pronouncing the word 'can't,' the Native teacher corrects us in good pronunciation and teaches us how to differentiate in pronouncing it.*"

Students observe differences in teaching approach in the *reliance on course material*. They note that the non-native teacher frequently uses structured materials and course books as a primary teaching resource, particularly for content-heavy topics. This structured approach helps students grasp complex lessons. One student explained, "*The Non-Native teacher always explains the materials based on the*

course book. For example, in hortatory text, she reads the concepts we study about and translates what the course subject means based on the book."

2. Learning Engagement and Classroom Interaction

Students' perspectives on learning engagement and classroom interaction focus on three key themes: encouragement of independent learning, group and pair work activities, and use of games and innovative strategies.

Notable aspects of the native teacher's teaching style include the encouragement of independent learning, which allows students to explore and discover information on their own. Rather than immediately explaining unfamiliar words, the native teacher motivates students to use a dictionary to find meanings themselves. A student shared, *"When the Native teacher is conducting a game and there are some unfamiliar words, she doesn't directly tell us the meaning but gets us to open a dictionary and find it by ourselves."*

Group and pair work activities are also a significant part of classroom interaction. The native teacher frequently incorporates group activities, often through games, supporting collaboration and active participation. The non-native teacher, on the other hand, regularly employs pair work, especially to maintain order in larger classes. One student noted, *"The Native teacher applies group work because she likes to conduct games in lesson time. Also, when we discuss pamphlets and banners, she asks us to do tasks and presentations in groups."*

Students appreciate the use of games and innovative strategies employed by the native teacher to maintain engagement, particularly during afternoon sessions when students tend to feel tired. The native teacher's creative approach includes storytelling, songs, and new games to sustain interest and make learning enjoyable. As one student observed, *"The Native Teacher always puts games in between. Moreover, the English class is in the afternoon when we feel really sleepy. She creates new games, sometimes uses songs, and tells funny stories so we don't feel bored during class."*

3. Teacher's Personal and Professional Qualities

Three sub-themes highlight the importance of personal and professional qualities in teaching: motivation and encouragement, adaptability and creativity, and role model perception.

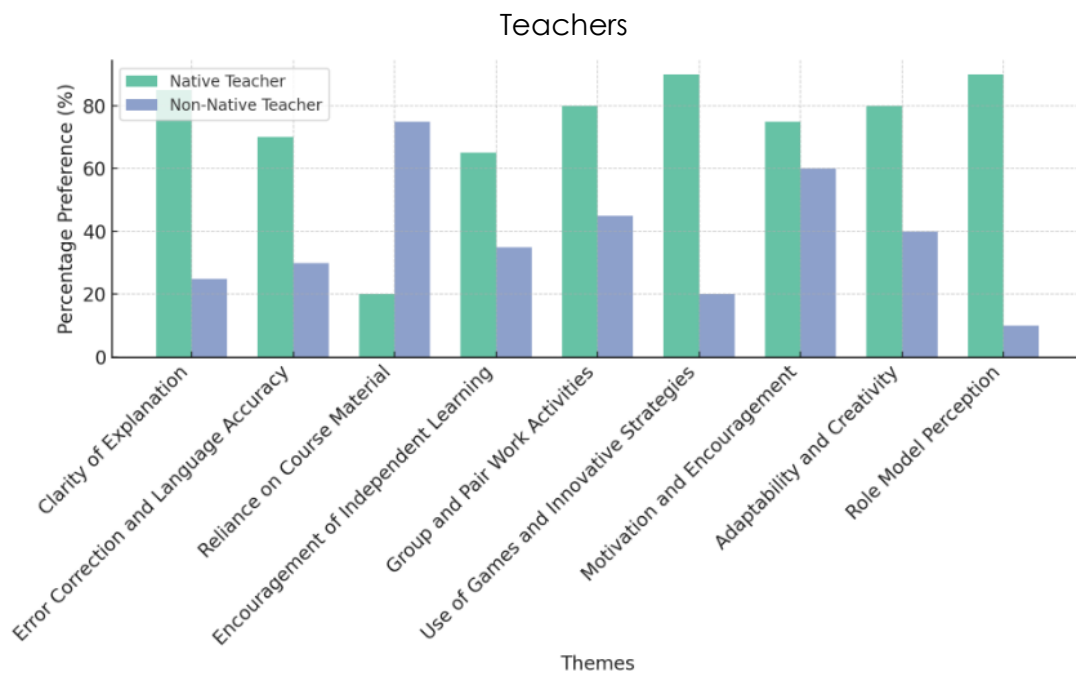
Motivation and encouragement are key components of the native teacher's approach, as she frequently expresses appreciation for students' contributions and

opinions. This positive encouragement creates a supportive learning environment. One student remarked, *"The Native Teacher gives more appreciation to us. Even when we make mistakes in conveying our opinions, she still praises us by saying 'Good' or gives us a sticker."* In contrast, the non-native teacher shares personal motivational stories from her life, aiming to inspire students to persevere and work hard, as noted by a student who said, *"The Non-Native Teacher likes to tell us her life stories to motivate us to study hard, as she did in her life."*

Adaptability and creativity are attributable to the native teacher, who demonstrates strong improvisational skills and a creative approach to lesson planning. This flexibility allows her to adjust activities based on student engagement and needs. A student shared, *"The Native Teacher looks more confident and creative than the Non-Native Teacher. She always finds new ways to make the class enjoyable and can improvise well during lessons."*

The role model perception of the native teacher significantly influences students' views of effective teaching. She is seen as an ideal English teacher, embodying qualities such as patience, cultural adaptability, and openness to student opinions. One student expressed, *"The Native Teacher is more patient, explains with clear expression, adapts easily to our different cultures, and is kind by always appreciating our efforts."*

Figure 1. Thematic Summary of Students' Preference towards Native and Non-Native



The figure demonstrates students' preferences for teaching approaches used by native and non-native English-speaking teachers across several instructional themes. Native teachers are overwhelmingly preferred in most areas, especially in Clarity of Explanation, Group and Pair Work Activities, Use of Games and Innovative Strategies, and Role Model Perception. This suggests that students highly value the native teachers' creativity, engagement techniques, and ideal teacher qualities.

In contrast, non-native teachers show a significantly higher preference in themes like Reliance on Course Material, where structured, textbook-based explanations may be beneficial for student understanding. Besides, students show a moderate preference for non-native teachers in areas such as Error Correction and Language Accuracy, possibly valuing their focus on grammatical precision.

These findings indicate that while native teachers are appreciated for their engaging and adaptive teaching style, students recognize non-native teachers' structured and systematic approach, highlighting unique strengths in both groups that contribute to effective learning.

DISCUSSION

The study's findings highlight significant preferences for teaching styles and approaches by students regarding native and non-native English-speaking teachers. These preferences emphasize the effectiveness of certain teaching qualities and approaches, providing insight into how native and non-native teachers uniquely contribute to English language learning. By examining students' perceptions across the themes of teaching effectiveness and comprehension, learning engagement, and teacher's personal and professional qualities, it becomes clear that both types of teachers offer complementary strengths that can improve language acquisition.

In terms of teaching effectiveness and student comprehension, students valued the clarity of explanations provided by native teachers, largely due to their use of expressive gestures and body language. This finding aligns with prior studies, such as Copland et al. (2016), where students viewed NESTs as effective in oral fluency and pronunciation instruction. This suggests that non-verbal communication is a powerful tool in facilitating comprehension (Ghafar & Ali, 2023), particularly for challenging concepts. These results correspond to prior research carried out by Rasyid et al. (2023), which stated that NESTs could provide clearer explanations as they do not face language barriers. NESTs also possess an intuitive understanding of

pronunciation and expressions and offer cultural insights that help students grasp the practical use of the language (Prayogi & Widiyati, 2024; Punyaporn, 2024; Colmenero & Lasagabaster, 2024)

While both teacher groups focused less on grammar, students seemed to appreciate the emphasis on pronunciation and accurate language modeling by native teachers. A study confirms that NNESTs often struggle with pronunciation due to the phonetic and phonological differences between English and their native languages (Al-Asi, 2024). Another study indicates that native teachers with a strong command of the language are better at perceiving and assimilating pronunciation (Takidze, 2024; Gordon & Barrantes-Elizondo, 2024). On the other hand, non-native teachers' structured reliance on course materials was well-received for more complex, content-heavy topics, which indicates that students might benefit from systematic instruction when learning abstract concepts or challenging material. The course material-based approach preferred with non-native teachers aligns with Beverborg and Müller (2023), who found that students value both teaching types but see each as meeting different educational needs. Rasyid et al. (2023) also notes that NNESTs tend to follow textbooks closely, while NESTs utilize a wide range of language learning activities, including newspapers, posters, and other authentic materials. NESTs rarely stick strictly to lesson plans or the resources provided in course books. Árvá and Medgyes (2000), as cited in Llorca and Calvet-Terré (2022), also stated that NNESTs rely on the textbook as the primary source of activities and language used in the classroom. Thus, while native teachers are often good at helping students understand through clear explanations and natural language use, non-native teachers offer a more organized approach that helps students comprehend complex material.

The theme of learning engagement and classroom interaction further distinguishes the preferred teaching styles. Native teachers are seen as effective in promoting independent learning by encouraging students to use resources like dictionaries, developing a sense of autonomy and active learning. According to Alseweed and Dhaif-Allah (2000), as referenced in Rasyid (2023), NESTs enhance independent learning by focusing more on the teaching process than on the end results. This approach aligns with research findings that suggest it promotes self-sufficiency and is supported by constructivist theories emphasizing student-centered learning (Woods & Copur-Gencturk, 2023). In contrast, another study indicated that

NNESTs tend to prefer a more teacher-centered model, while some students, especially those in their mid-teens, seek greater autonomy in their learning (Deng et al., 2023). This age group often values opportunities to take control of self-regulatory capacity (Li et al., 2024), explore independently, and apply critical thinking skills (Bachtiar et al., 2023).

Group and pair work, along with the use of games, were more associated with native teachers, contributing to a dynamic and interactive classroom atmosphere. This corresponds with Rao (2009), as cited in Deng et al. (2023), who noted that NESTs often employ a hands-on approach through role-plays and games, characterized by an "intuitive-random" teaching style. They tend to favor a "global" teaching method, utilizing holistic strategies like guessing and inferencing to identify the main ideas in reading and listening materials.

This preference may reflect students' need for varied and engaging activities. Gamified scenarios, in particular, can help maintain focus and energy, motivating young individuals to adopt and sustain healthy behaviors (Gkintoni et al., 2024). This approach is especially beneficial during afternoon classes when students are more likely to experience fatigue. In the contrary, non-native teachers likely use pair work to meet classroom management needs, especially in larger groups, ensuring each student is more easily monitored and supported. In addition to Anatolyivna (2024), classroom management in such settings requires strong organizational skills from teachers to ensure the active participation of all students.

Teacher's personal and professional qualities appear to have a strong impact on students' preferences. Native teachers, in particular, were recognized for their motivational support, adaptability, and creative teaching style—qualities that many students viewed as both inspiring and idealistic. This perception aligns with research on the "native speaker fallacy," a concept introduced by Phillipson (1992) and referenced in Selvi et al. (2023), which highlights the belief that the ideal English teacher is a native speaker. Additionally, Llurda and Calvet-Terré (2022b) point to a common belief that idealizes native speakers as the ultimate language models and sources of knowledge, strengthening their position as preferred teachers. These qualities are consistent with attributes identified in literature as essential for effective teaching, such as emotional support, flexibility (Li et al., 2024), and cultural sensitivity (Colmenero & Lasagabaster, 2024).

Non-native teachers, however, shared personal motivational stories that were perceived as a relatable form of encouragement. Such shared experiences can be essential for connecting with students on a more personal level, particularly in culturally diverse or linguistically challenging environments. This aligns with the study by Llurda and Calvet-Terré (2022b), which suggests that non-native teachers often demonstrate greater empathy towards students than native teachers. This empathy is attributed to non-native teachers having experienced the same language learning process as their students. This finding positions NNESTs as valuable sources of motivation through their ability to foster personal connections and provide relatable encouragement. Oppositely, Deng (2024) found that NESTs were perceived as more caring, flexible, and engaging, which also positively contributes to student motivation. This highlights the different yet complementary ways both types of teachers can motivate students, with NNESTs are good at creating personal connections with students, while NESTs are known for their engaging teaching methods. Wong (2013) found that NESTs motivate students by using interactive methods, while NNESTs inspire students by sharing relatable personal experiences. Similarly, the findings show that students feel encouraged by NESTs' positive feedback and connect with NNESTs through shared experiences in learning challenges.

The findings of this study align with and extend the research on students' perceptions of native and non-native English-speaking teachers across different countries and educational contexts. For instance, in the UAE, Awad, Abu Guba, and Fareh (2024) found that students viewed NESTs as more fluent and NNESTs as effective in explaining complex material—a trend similarly observed in this study, where students valued NESTs for clarity and engagement, and NNESTs for structured, content-focused instruction. Sung's (2014) study with Hong Kong students also revealed preferences for NESTs in communicative skills and NNESTs in grammar instruction, supporting the findings that students appreciate each teacher type for different strengths. Inbar-Lourie and Donitsa-Schmidt (2020) showed that students prioritize teaching quality over the teacher's native background in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) settings, a sentiment mirrored in our study. Although students preferred specific teacher qualities, they ultimately valued effective, engaging instruction from both NESTs and NNESTs.

This study is based on key assumptions that students' perceptions accurately represent teaching quality and that native and non-native teachers naturally differ in their instructional approaches due to language acquisition backgrounds. The study's strength lies in its comprehensive analysis of teaching effectiveness, learning engagement, and teachers' personal and professional qualities, offering a clear and balanced understanding of what students prefer. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) add depth by capturing detailed, qualitative insights from students. However, a major limitation is its reliance on subjective student perceptions, which may be influenced by biases or stereotypes, such as the "native speaker fallacy." The study also lacks teacher perspectives and observational data, which would provide a more balanced evaluation. Additionally, the small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could improve by including teachers' viewpoints, conducting classroom observations to capture real teaching dynamics, considering cultural factors affecting student preferences, and applying findings to develop training programs that incorporate the strengths of both teaching styles. Expanding the participant pool and exploring the long-term impact of different teaching approaches could also provide deeper insights.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a comprehensive understanding of 10th-grade EFL students' preferences for teaching approaches used by Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) and Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs). The preference for NESTs in areas like pronunciation, interactive activities, and independent learning shows the importance of flexible and engaging teaching in keeping students interested and improving practical language skills. In contrast, the reliance on NNESTs for structured instruction in grammar and vocabulary shows the value of clear and organized methods when handling complex language topics. These insights suggest that combining the strengths of both NESTs and NNESTs can create a balanced and effective learning environment, matching teaching methods with different student preferences and educational goals.

These findings have practical implications for teacher training and classroom strategies. Schools and language programs can implement team-teaching approaches, where NESTs and NNESTs collaborate to provide a balanced learning experience. Teacher training programs can help all teachers learn both interactive

and structured teaching methods. Curriculum designers can also use these insights to develop lesson plans that combine interactive activities with structured language instruction, ensuring that students benefit from both fluency-focused and accuracy-focused teaching approaches. By combining the strengths of both NESTs and NNESTs, educational institutions can create a more effective and adaptable learning environment that meets diverse student needs.

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