

The Korean University Students' Preferences Toward Native English Speaking Teachers*

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This study investigated preferences of the Korean university students toward native/nonnative English speaking teachers in order to draw more reasonable generalizations. To do this, three research questions were addressed: (1) What are the university students' preferences toward native English speaking teachers? (2) From the perspectives of the students, what are the specific strengths and weaknesses of native/nonnative English teachers? and (3) What are the implications of these perceptions for learning? The participants were 177 students from a national university in a metropolitan city. The results indicated no overall preferences for native English speaking teachers over nonnative English speaking teachers. However, the students showed a preference for native English speaking teachers in teaching specific areas, such as pronunciation, culture, and communication. The students in this study considered that a combination of native English speaking teachers and nonnative English speaking teachers is appropriate. There was no significant gender or student year difference in Korean university students' preferences toward native/nonnative English speaking teachers. The results from the present study suggest more comprehensive considerations when taking teacher choice and preferences into account for Korean university students.

[native English speaking teachers/nonnative English speaking teachers/preference/원어민영어교사/비원어민영어교사/선호도]

I. INTRODUCTION

In many EFL (English as a foreign language) countries, the demand for native English teachers or teachers with native-like proficiency is high. Educators and

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policy makers have reached consensus that qualified native teachers of English with proper educational background and training are an important part of English teaching in Korea. They are live role models for Korean students in acquiring authentic spoken English. This admiration for oral fluency is also related to the current pedagogical trend in Korea, which focuses on speaking and listening skills.

As ESL (English as a second language) or EFL teachers, native English speaking teachers have definite advantages in the classroom. In their international survey of EFL and ESL teachers, Reves and Medgyes (1994) report that native English speaking teachers were more capable of creating motivation and an English environment in the school, taught the language rather than about the language, and applied more effective and innovative teaching techniques. Native English speaking teachers also receive high marks when it comes to teaching in specific skill areas such as pronunciation or culture. Filho (2002), in his study, also reports that a large majority of the students said they would prefer a native English speaking teacher for American culture, communication skills and pronunciation classes.

Many universities in Korea now have native English speaking teachers teaching various English courses to students of different levels. Studies on the effectiveness of native English teachers, their self-perceptions, or performance, have only been conducted recently. A neglected, but essential, viewpoint on this issue comes from students themselves. Therefore, the present study was motivated to explore Korean university students' preferences toward native/nonnative English speaking teachers. Specifically, three research questions were addressed: (1) What are the preferences of Korean university students toward native English speaking teachers? (2) From the perspective of the students, what are the specific strengths and weaknesses of native English speaking and nonnative English speaking teachers? and (3) What are the implications of these perceptions for learning?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of native English speaking teachers and nonnative English speaking

teachers in the field of applied linguistics has become a rapidly growing, emergent field of research today. From methodologies to theories of language study the native speaker occupies a basic position as a springboard for the judgement of language production and evaluation. The major conviction behind the native speaker is that s/he can at anytime give valid and stable judgements on her or his language. S/he is capable of identifying ill-formed grammatical expressions in her or his language even though s/he may not be able to explain exactly why they are ill-formed (Li, 2005).

The assumption of native speakers (NS) superiority has become a controversial issue in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). Much research has been conducted to explore the issue of native speakers (NS)/nonnative speakers (NNS) dichotomy in language teaching. Phillipson (1992) argues that nonnative English speaking teachers can be trained to gain abilities that are associated with native English speaking teachers (i.e., fluency, correct usage of idiomatic expressions, and knowledge about the cultural connotations of English). Moreover, Phillipson evaluates nonnative speaking teachers' learning processes as a valuable quality.

Researchers have pointed out that both NS and NNS have advantages that can complement each other's strengths. Specifically, Medgyes (1994) provides six positive characteristics of nonnative English speaking teachers. They 1) provide a good learner model to their students, 2) are able to teach language strategy very effectively, 3) are able to provide more information about the language to their students, 4) understand the difficulties and needs of the students, 5) are able to anticipate and predict language difficulties, and 6) can (in EFL settings) use the students' native language to their advantage. One of the obvious disadvantages is that majority of nonnative English speaking teachers, as Medgyes (1994) remarks, even the best nonnative speakers of English, will never reach native competence in spite of all their efforts.

Native English speaking teachers also enjoy several advantages. According to Li (2005), their authentic English attracts students' attention. Secondly, their lively, flexible and unpredictable teaching methods differ greatly from those of nonnative speakers of teachers. Thirdly, a lively class environment in which students are encouraged to speak and express themselves has drawn more and more students into their classes. However, foreign teachers' knowledge of their

students' learning habits and their needs is very limited (Li, 2005).

Medgyes (1994) investigated the differences between native and nonnative English teachers regarding the aspects of knowledge of grammar, language competence, competence in local language, and teaching behavior. They discovered that native English teachers have advantages in language proficiency and tend to create more relaxing, friendship-oriented relationships with students, whereas nonnative English teachers have advantages in knowledge of grammar, local language and culture, and they are more likely to follow the content of textbooks. McNeill (1994) tested four groups of teachers on predicting their learners' vocabulary needs in connection with reading texts. He found that nonnative teachers, regardless of teaching experience, had a distinct advantage when it came to identifying their learners' vocabulary needs.

In the past few years, researchers have recognized the importance of examining the NS/NNS issue from the perspective of students. This is significant in that students are, by nature, the consumers of their teachers' teaching and, as a result, can offer valuable feedback on and insight into the discussion. Regarding a student preference for NS/NNS teachers, Lasagabaster and Sierra (2002) reported that EFL students have a preference for native English speaking teachers over nonnative English speaking teachers, but they also show that a combination of native English speaking teachers and nonnative English speaking teachers is even more appropriate. Also, Clayton (2000) indicated in his study that university students seem to be more inclined towards native speaker teachers than younger students.

A growing numbers of native English speakers come to Korea to teach English in language centers and universities. There are, however, few studies on the Korean students' preferences toward NS/NNS teachers. The present study aims to draw out Korean university students' opinions and preferences towards NS/NNS teachers by using a survey method. The findings will provide an important viewpoint in the overall conversation about instructor choice in the classroom.

III. METHODOLOGY

1. Participants

The participants were 177 students from a national university in a metropolitan city. The students voluntarily participated in this study: 72 freshmen, 66 sophomores, 19 juniors, and 20 seniors. Of the 177 participants, 61 were males, 34.5%, and 116 were females, 65.5%. Participants ranged from 20 to 27 years of age. The university offers optional or required English courses taught by native/nonnative English teachers. All participants had been taught by both native/nonnative English teachers.

2. The Questionnaire

The questionnaire designed by Meadows and Muramatsu (2007) was used in this study with some modifications. The original questionnaire had been designed to measure American university student attitudes and preferences toward native and nonnative language teachers. The questionnaire was adapted with terminology more appropriate to the Korean context. The questionnaire was administered during the fall semester of 2008 (see Appendix for the questionnaire).

The first part consisted of biographical questions, including students' gender and year at college. The second part included opinion statements about native English speaking teachers, such as I prefer a native speaker as my English teacher. The students indicated whether or not, and to what degree, they agreed with each statement. The responses to the survey were used for the analysis of student preferences toward native English speaking teachers as well as for descriptive purposes. The items were designed in a selected-response format where respondents were asked to select one response from a five point Likert scale with "strongly agree (1)" and "strongly disagree (5)" and neutral as a midpoint.

Whereas the above-mentioned questionnaire investigated general preferences quantitatively, the open-ended questions were designed to pull out valuable qualitative data about the participants' perceptions toward native English speaking teachers and nonnative English speaking teachers and these teachers' effectiveness in the classroom. Also, the students were given a chance to imagine three different team-teaching scenarios which featured various combinations of native

English speaking teachers and nonnative English speaking teachers (i.e., NS-NS English teachers, NNS-NS English teachers, and NNS-NNS English teachers) and to choose the one that they would most prefer. Then, the participants were asked to write specific reasons for their choice. The questionnaire took approximately thirty minutes to be filled out. The researcher was in the same room with the participants to answer their questions while the questionnaire was filled out.

3. Data Analysis

The data were collected during the fall semester of 2008. SPSS 14 was used to analyze the data. Frequencies and descriptive statistics were used to analyze the students' overall preferences toward the native/nonnative English teachers. For each item, the questionnaire responses (1-strongly agree, 2-agree, 3-neutral, 4-disagree, 5-strongly disagree) were numerically calculated for the mean score. Also, *t* test was conducted to determine whether male and female students were significantly different in preference. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare the mean differences among groups (years at college). The level of significance was set at $p = .05$.

Responses to the three open-ended questions were coded and analyzed for patterns of responses. Initially, a list of the responses for each question was compiled. These responses were then coded and categorized according to common words, phrases, and ideas. For the analysis of the open-ended questions, open and axial coding was used to identify general categories of information contained in the responses and label categories in data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For every item in the survey, the data were entered in a grid so that the researcher could compare the number of students responding and compute response percentages. The students' comments were categorized according to strengths and weakness of native English speaking teachers and nonnative English speaking teachers.

IV. RESULTS

1. Korean University Students' Preferences toward NS Teachers

The students were asked to answer the degree of agreement for a number of

statements regarding a preference for native English speaking teachers, using a 5-point scale (where 1 was "strongly agree" and 5 was "strongly disagree"). To examine the general preference for native English speaking teachers, each item was numerically calculated for the mean scores. All items with a mean score of 2.50 and above were considered as indication of disagreement with the item statements.

For items one and four, the students showed a moderate preference for native English speaking teachers over nonnative English teachers. The average result of item one (*I prefer a native speaker as my foreign language teacher*) was 2.39 which is slightly below the 2.5 midpoint dividing NS/NNS preference and registering on the "agree" side of the scale. For item four (*I prefer a Korean teacher because I can ask questions in Korean*), the students expressed their disagreement with the mean score of 2.93.

However, the data also showed that their native English teachers' preferences are not unequivocal. Item three (*I would be disappointed if my English teacher was not a native speaker*) was 3.20, which registers on the "disagree" side of the scale. The result of item six even revealed the students' positive preferences toward nonnative English teachers. For item six (*I think that a non-native speaking teacher is qualified if she/he has lived and/or studied in the country where the language is spoken*), the students showed their agreement with the mean score of 2.24. This tells us that although the students indicated a preference for the native English speaking teachers, they were still agreeable to nonnative English speaking teachers. In addition, the students disagreed with the statement that a native English speaking teacher makes them more interested in learning ($M=2.78$).

In addition, *t* test was conducted to determine whether male and female students were significantly different in preference. ANOVA was used to compare the mean differences among groups (years at college). The results revealed no significant gender or year differences in university students' preferences toward native English speaking teachers. It seemed that the participants' preferences were shared across whole group. Table 1 displays the results of each item.

Table 2 shows more detailed responses for each item. Consisted with the general belief, a good number of the students (68.7%) expressed their preference with native English speaking teachers. Though showing a preference for native

Table 1
Results of Descriptive Analysis of the Students' Preferences

	Items	Mean	SD
1	I prefer a native speaker as my foreign language teacher.	2.39	.989
2	I think that a native speaker is a better teacher than a non-native speaker.	3.20	1.066
3	It does not matter whether my foreign language teacher is a native speaker or not.	2.82	.934
4	I prefer a Korean teacher because I can ask questions in Korean	2.93	1.055
5	I would be disappointed if my foreign language teacher was not a native speaker.	3.72	.964
6	I think that a non-native speaker teacher is qualified if she/he has lived and/or studied in the country where the language is spoken.	2.24	.887
7	A native speaker teacher makes me more interested in learning.	2.78	1.114

Table 2
Summary of Results

	Items	Strongly agree/ agree(%)	Neutral (%)	Strongly disagree/ disagree(%)
1	I prefer a native speaker as my English teacher.	68.7	14	18.6
2	I think that a native speaker is a better teacher than a nonnative speaker.	28.8	22.6	48.6
3	It does not matter whether my English teacher is a native speaker or not.	43.0	30.5	26.5
4	I prefer a Korean teacher because I can ask questions in Korean	43.5	20.9	35.5
5	I would be disappointed if my English teacher was not a native speaker.	14.7	7.9	77.4
6	I think that a non-native speaking teacher is qualified if she/he has lived and/or studied in the country where the language is spoken.	75.7	11.9	12.4
7	A native speaking teacher makes me more interested in learning.	48.6	15.8	35.6

English speaking teachers, 77.4% of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, "I would be disappointed if my English teacher was not a native speaker." 75.7% of the students agreed and strongly agreed with the statement, "I think that a nonnative speaker teacher is qualified if she/he has lived and/or studied in the country where the language is spoken." It seems that the students do not differentiate their English teachers based on teachers' status as NS or NNS.

More strikingly, only 28.8% of the students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I think that a native speaker is a better teacher than a nonnative speaker." 48.6% of the students agreed and strongly agreed with the statement, "A native speaker teacher makes me more interested in learning." This results provides insight on Korean students' views and preferences toward NS or NNS in a university.

2. NS Teachers' Strengths and Weaknesses

The students were asked to answer strengths and weaknesses of native English speaking teachers. Multiple answers were allowed. The students' comments were categorized as strengths and weaknesses of having native English speaking teachers for their instructor. Five categories of strengths were identified: learning fluent and accurate pronunciation, learning and experiencing conversational English, being motivated to speak and listen English in class, learning cultural knowledge, and an enjoyable class. Table 3 shows the percentages of responses by category. The categories are presented in descending order from the most frequent to the least frequent.

Table 3
The Students' Perceived Strengths of NS

Categories of students' responses	Numbers of students (%)
Learning fluent, accurate pronunciation	101 (57.0)
Learning/experiencing conversational English.	46 (25.9)
Being motivated to speak/listen in class.	31 (17.5)
Learning cultural knowledge.	28 (15.8)
The class is enjoyable.	5 (2.0)

As shown in Table 3, pronunciation was overwhelmingly the most frequently

cited category in response. One hundred one students responded that the primary criteria for strengths of native English speaking teachers was pronunciation. At 25.9%, having a conversational experience with a native speaker was the second most frequent category in the responses. The students described, "I can experience what it would be like communicating with a native speaker," and "I can learn a real-life conversation."

Following this, the students responded that they were motivated to speak and listen more in the English class taught by native English speaking teachers. The next being ranked was cultural knowledge. The twenty-eight students (15.8%) responded that native English speaking teachers "enable us to understand non-verbal communication or cultural meanings of expressions," and "provide cultural knowledge that we cannot acquire from the text." Lastly, the students pointed out that native English speaking teachers make the classroom environment more enjoyable.

On the other hand, eighty students (45%) felt strongly stressed out due to their extensive efforts on figuring out the meaning of the instructors instead of concentrating on learning. Some students even answered that it would be meaningless if they don't understand the class." More specifically, sixty-eight students (38.4%) pointed out that, "I couldn't ask a question even though I have it in my mind," and "I wanted to say something, but I couldn't." It seemed that the students responded in the negative because of their inability to communicate effortlessly in the target language. When there are communication problems between students and native English speaking teachers, students cannot do anything to improve the situation.

A sizeable students (30 students, 16.9%) expressed that the lack of knowledge of Korean culture, Korean language or Korean students was disadvantageous. This results show that there are many more challenges to overcome in the English classroom than just living up to the status of a native English speaker. The following Table 4 summarizes the perceptions of Korean university students regarding the weaknesses of the native English speaking teachers.

Table 4
The Students' Perceived Weaknesses of NS

Categories of students' responses	Numbers of students (%)
Difficulty in understanding the class	80 (45.0)
Difficulty in communication with NS teachers (asking a question)	68 (38.4)
Lack of understanding of Korean culture/Korean language/Korean students.	30 (16.9)

3. NNS Teachers' Strengths and Weaknesses

In the case of nonnative English speaking teachers, two things the students felt the primary criteria for strengths of nonnative English speaking teachers was how easily they could ask a question (55%) and how easily they could understand the class (42.9%). These responses, however, could be attributed to the absence of a language barrier. Conversely, these two responses were listed as the most cited weaknesses of native English speaking teachers. The representative responses were, "It is easy to understand the lesson," and "The nonnative English speaking teachers explained everything," and the students expressed that they felt relaxed in class. A sizeable of the students (15 students, 11.8%) commented that nonnative English speaking teachers had a better knowledge of grammar, but did not have proper pronunciation as compared to their native speaking counterparts. Table 5 shows the percentages of responses by category. The categories are presented in descending order from most frequent to least frequent.

Table 5
The Students' Perceived Strengths of NNS

Categories of students' responses	Numbers of students(%)
Easy to understand the English lessons	98(55)
Feel comfortable in asking questions	76(42.9)
Knowledge of grammar	15(11.8)

The students also voiced their concerns regarding the weaknesses of nonnative English teachers. The weaknesses of nonnative English speaking teachers pointed out by the students are pronunciation, lack of English usage, less opportunity to improve listening and speaking skills, and focusing on grammar/relying on textbooks. A total of 43.5% of responses pointed out the issue of pronunciation

of nonnative English speaking teachers. 28.8% of the students mentioned nonnative English speaking teachers' lack of English usage. It was found that the nonnative English speaking teachers cannot fulfil the students' expectations in pronunciation, idiomatic and colloquial expressions. Also, the students perceived that the classes taught by nonnative English speaking teachers were very formal. They remembered being spoon-fed in English lessons, such as an over-emphasis on grammar and over reliance on textbooks during English lessons. Table 6 summarizes the perceptions of Korean university students regarding the weaknesses of nonnative English speaking teachers.

Table 6
The Students' Perceived Weaknesses of NNS

Categories of students' responses	Numbers of students (%)
Pronunciation	77 (43.5)
Lack of English usage	51 (28.8)
Less opportunity to improve listening and speaking skills	29 (16.3)
Focusing on grammar/Rely on textbooks	20 (11.2)

4. The Students' Preferences for Team-teaching Scenarios

The students were given a hypothetical team-taught classroom with three possible combinations (NS-NS, NS-NNS, NNS-NNS) and asked to indicate their combination preference. As shown in Table 7, the majority of the students (144 students, 81.3%) chose the NS-NNS combination. Fifteen students (8.4%) chose the NS-NS combination, and eight students (4.5%) selected the NNS-NNS combination.

Table 7
The Students' Preferences for Team-Teaching Scenarios

Team-teaching scenarios	Numbers of students (%)
NS-NNS	144 (81.3)
NS-NS	15 (8.4)
NNS-NNS	8 (4.5)

The students in this study explained the reasons behind the preferred arrangement by stating different contributions NS and NNS teachers make to their

English learning. They acknowledged the respective expertise which both NS and NNS teachers possess, and said that they would need both to succeed in their language study. Of the fifteen students who preferred the NS-NS teacher combination, the students stated that the NS-NS arrangement would be good in terms of language exposure. Based on the students' responses, the students in the present study do not have a clear preference for either native English speaking teachers or nonnative English speaking teachers. Rather, they feel that teachers with both these language backgrounds have unique attributes.

V. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Some factors may influence student preferences between native English speaking teachers and nonnative English speaking teachers, such as learning experience, level of English proficiency, motivation, interest, personality, age, and gender. Native English speaking teachers may use English more accurately and appropriately than Korean teachers of English. They may use the language more fluently and confidently. However, does native proficiency in English mean better English teaching?

Several studies reported that university students seem to be more inclined towards native speaking teachers than younger students (Canagarajah, 1999; Filho, 2002; Liu & Zhang, 2007). However, the university students surveyed for this study did not show a strong preference towards native English speaking teachers. In addition, the results revealed no significant gender or year differences in university students' preferences toward native English speaking teachers. The Korean university students' responses in this study clearly indicate that being a native English speaker alone is not enough qualification to be a successful professional in an English language classroom.

The results showed that, although the students responded pronunciation in the English teachers' speech as very important, this factor did not solely affect the students' preferences for native English speaking teachers. Another noteworthy result is the students' preferences for qualified and trained nonnative English speaking teachers. Researchers have pointed out that both native English speaking

teachers and nonnative English speaking teachers have advantages that can complement each other's strengths (De Oliveira & Richardson 2004; Matsuda 2003). The students in this study also considered that a combination of native English speaking teachers and nonnative English speaking teachers is appropriate.

The students have perceptions of what and who best help them learn English. These perceptions are beginning to show patterns across learning contexts. The results from the present study suggest more comprehensive considerations when taking into account teacher choice and preference for Korean university students. Educational administrators need to be conscious of the native speaker fallacy and consider the students' preferences before rushing to employ native English speaking teachers. Matching a teacher's skill, qualifications, and experience with the student's needs and expectations and the program goals are all considerations. The present study only touched the surface of underlying student preferences and their perceptions of strengths and weaknesses regarding native English speaking teachers and nonnative speaking teachers. Further research is needed to investigate the student preferences at various levels and the link between individual student' goal and teacher preference.

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APPENDIX

Preferences toward Native English Speaking Teachers

I. Participant's demographic information: (Please check the appropriate blank.)

1. Age: 18-20 21-23 24-26 27 and older
2. Gender: Male Female

3. Academic standing:

Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

II. Here are opinion statements about native English speaking teachers. Please choose **only one** answer for each statement. You may circle or place an 'X' to indicate your response. There is no right or wrong answer, so please give your honest feelings about foreign language teachers in general.

1	I prefer a native speaker as my foreign language teacher.	SA	A	N	D	SD
2	I think that a native speaker can make a better teacher than a non-native speaker.	SA	A	N	D	SD
3	It does not matter whether my foreign language teacher is a native speaker or not.	SA	A	N	D	SD
4	I prefer an American teacher because I can ask questions in English.	SA	A	N	D	SD
5	I would be disappointed if my foreign language teacher was not a native speaker.	SA	A	N	D	SD
6	I think that a non-native speaker teacher is qualified if she/he has lived and/or studied in the country where the language is spoken.	SA	A	N	D	SD
7	A native speaker teacher makes me more interested in learning.	SA	A	N	D	SD

III. Please provide your opinions.

1. What are strengths of NS teacher from your perspective?
2. What are the strengths of a NNS teacher from your perspective?
3. What are the weaknesses you see in NS teachers for you?
4. What are the weaknesses of a NNS teacher for you?

IV. If presented with three possible teacher arrangements, which would you pick and why?

1. NS teacher and NS teacher
2. NNS teacher and NNS teacher
3. NS teacher and NNS teacher

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