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## **Native- and Non-Native Speaking English Teachers in Vietnam: Weighing the Benefits**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines a common belief that learners of English as a foreign language prefer to learn English from native-speaker teachers rather than non-native speakers of English. 50 Vietnamese learners of English evaluated the importance of native-speakerness compared with seven qualities valued in an English language teacher: teaching experience, qualifications, friendliness, enthusiasm, the ability to deliver interesting and informative classes, understanding of students' local culture, and advanced English communicative competence. Findings show that the respondents placed more value on all but one of these qualities than on native-speakerness. The only outlier was advanced English competence and respondents selected innate native-speakerness over this quality because they believed that native-speaker pronunciation was the ideal model. These findings build on a growing body of research that challenges the notion that native speakers of English are ideal English language teachers.

### **Introduction**

Although the notion that native speakers of a language are innately better teachers of that language than non-native speakers has been challenged (Canagarajah, 1999a, 1999b; Phillipson, 1992), many English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) institutions maintain that their students place greater value on learning from a native English-speaking teacher (NEST) than from a non-native English-speaking teacher (non-NEST). Holliday (2008) aptly summarises this notion:

I have heard influential employers [in the English language teaching industry] in Britain say that while they would abolish the discriminatory differentiation between 'native speakers' and 'non-native speakers' tomorrow, they can't because their 'customers demand it'. (p. 121)

The presumptive nature of this belief raises questions about its legitimacy, particularly since there is relatively little research to support it. To fill this gap, this study investigates the value ascribed to native and non-native English speaking teachers by learners of English as a Foreign Language at two universities in Vietnam. Specifically, we explore the degree of importance these students ascribed to native-speakerness compared to other characteristics valued by language educators. We stress that a very high degree of competence in the target language is crucial for language educators (Medgyes, 1992), and provides the foundation of a non-NEST's professional confidence (Murdoch, 1994). A high degree of competence is also a predictor of likely classroom success (Medgyes, 1999). In this study, we focus on English language teaching (ELT) professionals with advanced competence in all aspects of their second language.

### **Native and non-native speakers: theory and research**

This section will define the terms "native" and "non-native", outline the implications of this dichotomy for ELT practitioners. It will then summarize the primary advantages which research has attributed to each type of teacher.

#### **Defining "native" and "non-native"**

Although the innate characteristics of a native speaker of a language are difficult to define (Davies, 2004; Rajagopalan, 1999), some scholars have attempted to shed light on these complex notions. For example, Chomsky makes the universalist assertion that "everyone is a native speaker of the particular [language system] that that person has 'grown' in his/her mind/brain" (Chomsky, cited in Paikeday, 1985, p. 393). However, Chomsky's standpoint is purely linguistic and does not consider social factors or contextual constraints, and thus does not lend itself to a socially-contextualized investigation of the issue.

Medgyes (1992) also attempts to differentiate between native speakers (NSs) and non-native speakers (NNSs), arguing that "non-native speakers can never achieve a native speaker's competence" because they "can never be as creative and original as those whom they have learnt to copy" (pp. 342- 343). Similarly, Cook (1999) asserts that only a small percentage of second language (L2) users may pass for native speakers, comparing the feat with becoming an Olympian athlete or an opera singer. However, the sheer number of highly articulate expert non-native speakers in the ELT profession and in the academic field of applied linguistics refutes this notion. We contend that once an L2 learner reaches what Cook (1999) calls the "final" stage of language acquisition (which Cook notes is very difficult to define), the difference between native competence and advanced non-native competence is negligible.

Davies (2003, 2004) offers a more appropriate stance and argues that "nativeness" is characterized by certain elements (*cf.* Stern, 1983):

1. Acquiring the language during childhood
2. Ability to understand and accurately produce idiomatic forms of the language
3. Understanding how standard forms of the language differ from the variant that they themselves speak
4. Competent production and comprehension of fluent, spontaneous discourse.

According to this conceptualisation, all these elements but the first can theoretically be learned after childhood, provided the learner has sufficient aptitude, motivation, opportunities to practice and exposure to high-level language input (Davies, 2004; Medgyes, 1994). Therefore although it is difficult (Birdsong, 1992), it is possible for a learner to reach the same degree of syntactic, discursal, strategic, and even pragmatic proficiency in a second language as someone who acquired the language in childhood. The sole immutable and non-developmental difference between a native speaker and a non-native speaker of a language is childhood acquisition of the language, which is a poor basis for discriminating between the two groups.

### **The native/non-native schism in ELT**

In the field of ELT, non-NESTs are inevitably compared unfavourably with NESTs (Borg, 2006; Butler, 2007). Although there is little linguistic or pedagogical basis for making this distinction (Canagarajah, 1999a), this perception plays a crucial gate-keeping role in ELT because it empowers educators, language institutes and publishing companies in the English-speaking Centre countries (Phillipson, 1992) who stand to benefit from higher salaries, greater prestige, textbook sales and management and academic positions. Holliday (2008, p. 128) states that “British English”, with an attendant “British culture”, as it appears in textbooks, in language classes, and in the pedagogical repertoires of teachers, is not so much a standard language code as a marketable product which Centre ELT and applied linguistics institutions have long claimed as theirs by birthright (Canagarajah, 1999a). Conversely, those in Periphery communities, where English is taught and learned as a foreign language, tend to be disempowered because of their dependence on Centre educators, institutions, teacher-trainers and publishers who are perceived to ‘own’ the language. Consequently, non-NESTs often have difficulty finding jobs (Canagarajah, 1999a) and when they do, their salaries are considerably lower (Celik, 2006; Le, 2011; Ngo, 2008) and they receive fewer benefits than native-speaker teachers. They may also be considered second-rate educators (Braine, 2004; Celik, 2006; Medgyes, 1994), have their competence questioned (Canagarajah, 2005) and have to outperform their NS counterparts to feel accepted (Thomas, 1999).

Although other less polarising terms have been suggested such as “expert user” (Rampton, 1990) and “competent user” (Holliday, 2008), the native/non-native label remains firmly embedded in ELT ideology (Arva & Medgyes, 2000; Cook, 1999; Moussu & Llorca, 2008), where it benefits one group and excludes the other (Canagarajah, 1999a). This study will employ the terms “native speaker” and “non-native speaker” because the distinction between them is the primary focus of this research. However,

use of these terms is not intended to bestow legitimacy on the distinction, which is framed in this article as an artificial and disempowering construct (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 2002).

### **Perceptions of NESTs and non-NESTs by learners and educators**

Learners in Cheung's (2002) Hong Kong study (n=420) reported that NESTs had better oral skills, greater vocabulary, and insight into "Western" (presumably British, Australasian and North American) culture. On the other hand, their lexico-grammatical knowledge was deficient and they struggled to explain complex constructions. In addition, some teachers lacked understanding of language teaching methodology. Similar findings emerged from Mahboob's (2003) study of 32 L2 learners in an intensive English program in the USA. Conversely, the non-NESTs in these two studies were valued for their own experience as language learners, their use of strict methodology and their work ethic; however, they were perceived as having weaker oral skills and less cultural insight than their native-speaker counterparts.

Benke and Medgyes' (2005) study of 422 Hungarian learners of English revealed that native-speaker teachers were viewed as good models for imitation; however, their speech could be difficult for L2 learners to comprehend. 76 learners in Lasagabaster and Sierra's (2005) study at a university in the Basque Autonomous Community in Spain preferred NESTs for learning pronunciation, speaking and listening, but not for studying lexico-grammatical aspects of the language. Pacek's (2005) study of 89 L2 learners at a British university revealed greater concern for teachers' engagement, preparation, qualifications, and professional background than for their linguistic background.

Having learned the target language through conscious study rather than childhood acquisition, non-NESTs "may have a sounder grasp of English grammar and even be more effective...than the so-called native speakers" (Canagarajah, 1999a, p. 80) in teaching lexical, grammatical and metacognitive skills (Mahboob, 2004; Seidlhofer, 1999). And if explanations about grammar are ineffective in the L2, non-NESTs who share their students' L1 may use the shared L1 to facilitate understanding (Cook, 2005). Non-NESTs are also valuable models of successful language learners (Lee, 2000; Medgyes, 1994, 1999) who can anticipate and empathize with their students' learning difficulties (Arva & Medgyes, 2000; Celik, 2006; Kelch & Santana-Williamson, 2002; Seidlhofer, 1999).

One issue identified in studies by Luk (1998) and Moussu (2002) is non-NESTs' English pronunciation, which learners deemed an inadequate model for their own L2 pronunciation. However, there is evidence that some language learners struggle to differentiate between native and non-native English pronunciation. Kelch and Santana-Williamson (2002) tested L2 learners' ability to distinguish native from non-native speakers by playing them recordings of both native- and non-native speakers reading from the same text and asking them to identify the speakers' linguistic background. The learners identified this correctly only 45% of the time. In a similar study, Chiba, Matsuura and Yamamoto (1995) played Japanese university students a short English passage spoken by nine English speakers from Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka,

Great Britain, and the United States and asked them to identify the different varieties of English. Only one third of the respondents could accurately place the British and American accents, and roughly half of the respondents misidentified the Japanese English speakers as coming from elsewhere in Asia. These findings raise questions about the validity of learner perceptions about pronunciation models, a point to which we will return.

## **Methodology**

### ***Data collection instruments***

A framework that includes the attributes desirable in an English language teacher was constructed to provide a theoretical foundation for creating data-collection instruments. The framework is based on Brown's (2001) discussion of these attributes and supported by prominent studies in education literature. This framework, which we call the Language Teacher Characteristic framework, is as follows:

Professional characteristics:

- i) Experience of teaching (Brown, 2001)
- ii) Teaching qualifications relevant to EFL (Brown, 2001)

Personal characteristics:

- iii) Friendly personality (Brown, 2001; Prodromou, 1991)
- iv) Enthusiasm for teaching (Borg, 2006; Brown, 2001; Lee, 2010)

Pedagogical characteristics:

- v) Able to teach interesting, informative classes (Brown, 2001; McBer, 2000; Miller, 2012; Walls, Nardi, von Minden & Hoffman, 2002)

Cultural characteristics:

- vi) Understanding of/familiarity with the students' local culture (Brown, 2001; cf. Kirkpatrick, 2010)

Linguistic characteristics:

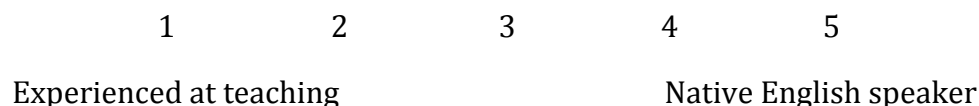
- vii) Advanced communicative competence in the L2 (Brosh, 1996; Brown, 2001)

Some items appearing in this framework also reflect the characteristics of good teachers generally (i.e., not just in ELT), which is expected as language teachers perform similar roles as other teachers and therefore embody the same characteristics (Borg, 2006). The Language Teacher Characteristic framework is not linked to a language education policy at the two institutions where the research was carried out. Nonetheless, given its foundation in the literature, it is likely to broadly reflect the qualities that these institutions demand of language educators.

Data were collected using two instruments, which were constructed around the above-mentioned framework. The first data collection instrument was a rating survey that employed bipolar semantic differential scales (see Figure 1), which elicited a graduated response about the value participants placed on native-speakerness compared with the seven characteristics listed in the Language Teacher Characteristic framework. Selecting options one or two signified greater value on the characteristic being investigated, while

selecting options four or five placed greater value on native-speakerness. Option three indicated neutrality.

i) Which is more important: that a teacher *is experienced at teaching*, or that s/he is a native English speaker?



*Figure 1. Sample questionnaire item*

The second data collection instrument was an open-ended self-report questionnaire. The questionnaire elicited attitudinal data about the perceived advantages and disadvantages of learning English from each type of teacher (see Figure 2). This instrument solicited granular descriptive data that complemented the one-dimensional data from the close-ended items in the rating survey instrument (Dörnyei, 2007). Also, participants' engagement with the topic was increased because they had the opportunity to express their ideas in a written format.

In your opinion, are there any advantages to learning English with a non-native speaker teacher? If so, what are they?

*Figure 2. Sample self-report questionnaire item*

To maximize validity, both instruments were piloted with nine Vietnamese learners of English who were not part of the sample proper and modified according to their responses and feedback.

### ***Participants***

The two instruments were distributed consecutively to 50 students at two public universities in Vietnam: 38 females and 12 males. All respondents were third year English majors between the ages of 20 and 24, with upper intermediate English language competence (as indicated by their level of English language class).

### ***Collection and analysis of data***

Participants gave their consent to participate prior to completing the rating survey and the self-report questionnaire at the end of a normal class period. The two instruments took a total of 15-20 minutes to complete.

The collected rating survey data were organized into a grouped frequency distribution (Denscombe, 2007) to determine which of the five options in each semantic differential scale was most commonly selected. Mean responses were also calculated for each semantic differential scale, and standard deviations were calculated to measure the

spread of data relative to the arithmetic mean for each scale. The self-report questionnaire data were coded according to the items in the Language Teacher Characteristic framework. These data provide descriptive support for trends or patterns in data from the rating survey, which is based on the same framework.

### Findings and discussion

Table 1 presents the proportion of respondents who selected each option in the seven semantic differential scales, along with mean ratings and standard deviations for each item. This section will analyse responses to each item and present the key patterns that emerged from the data.

**Table 1. Vietnamese learners of English (n=50): Survey responses**

Quality	Selected 1-2 / %	Selected 3 / %	Selected 4-5 / %	Mean	SD	No response
Experienced at teaching	27 (26.3%)	15 (31.3%)	6 (12.5%)	2.16	1.19	2
Good qualifications	30 (61.2%)	10 (20.4%)	9 (18.4%)	2.23	1.45	1
Friendly personality	25 (52.1%)	9 (18.7%)	14 (29.2%)	2.62	1.54	2
Enthusiastic	30 (61.2%)	12 (24.5%)	7 (14.3%)	2.26	1.22	1
Interesting classes	36 (72%)	8 (16%)	6 (12%)	1.98	1.33	0
Understands students' culture	32 (66.6%)	8 (16.7%)	8 (16.7%)	2.16	1.28	2
Understands / speaks English fluently	19 (38%)	14 (28%)	17 (34%)	2.9	1.52	0

### Experience

The mean rating of 2.16 (SD=1.19) indicates that the participants placed greater importance on teaching experience than on linguistic background. 27 (56.3%) respondents valued teaching experience the most, while only six (12.5%) placed greater emphasis on native-speakerness (Table 1). This finding may be connected to the ELT context in Vietnam. According to Pham (2001), some non-NESTs who teach at Vietnamese universities lack experience (*cf.* Le, 2011; Ngo, 2008), having been hired as soon as they graduated from university. Non-NESTs may also have an extremely high

teaching load, allowing them little time for professional development (Brogan, 2007; Brogan & Nguyen, 1999).

As for the teaching experience of expatriate native-speaker teachers, data on this topic are scarce due to limited empirical research within the Vietnam ELT context (Brogan, 2007; Le, 2011; Pham, 2006). However, Respondent 4 comments that NESTs “have little knowledge of teaching, they are lack of experience in teaching,” suggesting that the NEST employment situation is similar to Jeon and Lee’s (2006) assessment of ELT in China, where “many [native-speaker teacher] recruits are young without prior teaching experience, and consequently many do not finish their first-year contract” (p. 54). Although foreign teachers are officially required to have some prior teaching experience, high demand for teachers makes this difficult to enforce and leads to “problems in terms of the quality of those recruited” (Jeon & Lee, 2006, p. 54). Because lack of experience is an issue among both native- and non-native teachers in Vietnam, it is logical that Vietnamese learners of English would ascribe importance to this factor.

### **Qualifications**

Table 1 shows that the mean rating for the teacher qualifications item was 2.23 (SD=1.45), suggesting that appropriate qualifications carry more weight in the Vietnam EFL context than native-speakerness. Importance was ascribed to qualifications by 30 (61.2%) respondents, while only nine (18.4%) attached more value to native-speakerness. Self-report data supported this finding:

I think that if an English teacher is...well qualified..., student can learn so much from s/he. (Respondent 9)

As with experience, qualifications are an issue among both NESTs and non-NESTs in Vietnamese universities (Ngo, 2011). Although many NESTs have teaching qualifications and/or degrees in a relevant field, a considerable number do not. Respondent 9 goes on to say that “At some subjects, [NESTs] do not have degrees,” while Respondent 7 says that “Some native speak[ers] don’t specialize in the subject which they teach. “Again the situation bears comparison with China, where “in many circumstances native English speakers have been employed with an associate degree or as little as a US high school diploma” (Jeon & Lee, 2006, p. 54). Due to the great demand for English training in Vietnam since the “open-door” policy was initiated in 1986, Vietnamese non-NESTs are often recruited to work in universities and language institutes as soon as they finish their undergraduate studies, and “become teachers overnight without adequate preparation in TEFL methodology” (Pham, 2001, p. 30). In many cases, even experienced Vietnamese non-NESTs have few qualifications or training in methodology (Pham, 2001). Although this situation is changing as more universities require masters- or doctorate-level qualifications, more teacher-training courses become available and more teachers have the opportunity to study abroad. In sum, the relative deficit of qualifications among both NESTs and non-NESTs in Vietnam may explain the importance that Vietnamese learners of English ascribe to this factor.



### **Friendly personality**

The mean rating for this item was 2.62 (SD=1.54). Higher value was placed on a friendly personality than on linguistic background by 25 (52.1%) respondents, while 14 (29.2%) placed greater emphasis on native-speakerness. Respondent 14 said that teachers should be “friendly [and] interesting” while Respondent 15 bemoaned teachers that were “strict [and] haughty.” This result is perhaps to be expected since teacher friendliness is related to “affect”, that is, whether teachers are liked by their students. Learners whose affective filter (Krashen, 1987) is lowered are more inclined to take risks when attempting to produce language. The reduced classroom tension also allows for increased retention of input (Krashen, 1991). The participants in the present study placed greater value on affect than on native-speakerness.

### **Enthusiasm for teaching**

In line with Borg’s (2006) finding that enthusiasm is a key trait of language teachers, the mean rating for this characteristic was 2.26 (SD=1.22). Thirty (61.2%) respondents ascribed greater value to enthusiasm for teaching than to native-speakerness. Seven (14.3%) placed more value on native-speakerness. The respondents’ overall viewpoint is embodied by a quote from Respondent 8:

A native or non-native speaker is not important. The [crucial element] is that they...LOVE what they do and study for being able to push us into the love of studying language. [emphasis in original]

The respondent’s explicit link between enthusiastic teachers and motivated students is echoed by Respondent 5: “Their enthusiastic in teaching...encourage us to study.”

Two possible reasons emerge for the importance of this characteristic in Vietnam ELT. First, although most NESTs and non-NESTs in the ELT profession are enthusiastic about their work, this enthusiasm may be gradually diminished by excessive workload, which was noted earlier as a common issue among non-NESTs in Vietnam (Brogan, 2007). Similarly, teachers may have to teach at several institutions, such that “the same teachers can be found teaching in several universities at the same time, teaching the same commercial textbooks and repeating their own teaching methods again and again” (Ngo, 2008, p. 90). Low salaries (Ngo, 2008) may also lead to job dissatisfaction and decreased enthusiasm.

Secondly, some NESTs and non-NESTs may lack commitment to their work if their training and qualifications are in other fields and/or they do not plan to stay in the country after finishing their contract (Griffith, 2011). These factors can negatively impact the quality of instruction. Although measuring the enthusiasm or otherwise of language teachers in Vietnam is beyond the scope of this study, the above factors may partly explain why Vietnamese learners of English valued enthusiasm more than linguistic origin in their language teachers.

### **Interesting, informative classes**

The mean rating for this item is 1.98 (SD=1.33), the most robust finding among the seven qualities measured. Teachers who delivered interesting and informative classes were valued by 36 (72%) respondents. Only six respondents (12%) valued linguistic background more highly. Clearly, students appreciate teachers who can employ a range of interactive activities, organize, explain and clarify information, and arouse and sustain interest and motivation among students (Brosh, 1996). Interesting and informative classroom practices can increase language intake (Van Patten, 1990) and encourage “pushed output”, or attempts to use newly-learned, complex language rather than less complex, previously-internalized language (Batstone, 2002). The sample group in this study placed more importance on this quality than on a teacher’s linguistic background.

### **Understanding students’ culture**

The mean score for this item was 2.16 (SD=1.28). Greater importance was ascribed to familiarity with the local culture than to nativespeakerness by 32 respondents (66.6%), while eight respondents (16.7%) valued native-speakerness more highly. The self-report data is telling here. Twenty-one respondents wrote comments foregrounding the issue of cultural awareness in Vietnam language classrooms. For instance, Respondent 20 mentioned that “Due to difference between cultures...sometimes, learning with native speaker teachers makes me stress.”

Other respondents framed the issue in terms of differing norms of appropriateness:

[NESTs] don’t understand our culture as well as Vietnamese student’s habit. It causes some misunderstood between teachers and students. (Respondent 35)

My American teacher surprised so much when she saw same sexual student in my class holding [hands] together. (Respondent 21)

Respondent 25 highlighted the different expectations of classroom interaction:

They have some cultural shock when teaching us like students in Vietnam is not active as student in their country.

Similar to Jeon and Lee’s (2006) study in China, NESTs teaching in Vietnam may have only limited experience with the local cultural and pedagogical context since they are often hired on short-term teaching contracts. This unfamiliarity with local cultural and educational norms could potentially generate classroom tension, although this tension may be mitigated by factors such as a teacher’s personality and previous teaching experience. Conversely, a key advantage of learning from non-NESTs (provided they share the students’ culture) is that socio-pragmatic norms of teacher-student interaction such as turn-taking, topic selection and politeness strategies are clear to all parties, which may reduce miscommunication. Non-NESTs may also empathise with their students’ language learning difficulties (Arva & Medgyes, 2000) and provide guidance relating to their own pedagogical and linguistic context. For Vietnamese learners of English, all of these factors outweighed linguistic background.

## Fluency in speaking and understanding English

Linguistic fluency (defined as advanced communicative competence in the L2) is the only item in the Language Teacher Characteristic framework that is not rated more highly than native-speakerness by a clear majority of respondents. The mean rating for this characteristic was 2.9 (SD=1.52), signaling a marked inclination within the sample for native-speakerness over L2 communicative competence. Although a sizeable proportion (19 respondents or 38%) valued linguistic fluency, a similar number (17 respondents or 34%) valued innate native-speakerness more highly (Table 1). Fourteen participants (28%) selected the neutral option three.

The self-report data strongly suggests that pronunciation is the key issue. 30 of the 50 respondents wrote comments that native-speaker pronunciation was an advantage of NESTs and a handicap of non-NESTs. Unfortunately, it is difficult to grasp the precise nature of the perceived issue since respondents' comments were invariably non-specific:

The pronunciation of teachers may not be quite good, this can cause bad effects on students. (Respondent 27)

I don't know whether [non-NESTs'] pronunciation is right or wrong. (Respondent 8)

Although small numbers of respondents raised concerns about general fluency (n=5) and lexico-grammatical competence (n=2), pronunciation is clearly the crux of the issue. When considering pronunciation, we should reiterate that language learners might fail to differentiate between native and non-native English pronunciation (Chiba et al., 1995; Kelch & Santana-Williamson, 2002). Also, the importance attached to pronunciation can vary considerably: 24 respondents in Pacek's (2005) investigation of the most important features of a foreign language teacher listed intelligible pronunciation as crucial, but not *native-speaker* pronunciation. In fact, seven respondents listed native-speaker pronunciation as the *least* important feature.

Furthermore, some scholars (e.g., Kirkpatrick, 2010; Modiano, 1999) argue that phonologically proficient non-NESTs may be more intelligible and better models for L2 learners than a native English speaker who speaks a local variety of English with a strong regional accent. Kirkpatrick (2010) argues that phonological proficiency of L2 learners in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (including Vietnam) should not be measured against native-speaker standards at all. Rather, phonological proficiency should be measured against their ability to use English as a lingua franca to communicate with other Asian nations where there is considerable mutual intelligibility among English speakers (Deterding & Kirkpatrick, 2006).

In sum, while respondents in the current study noted pronunciation as an advantage of learning from a NEST, there are questions about whether L2 learners can accurately identify native accents and indeed whether native-like pronunciation is an appropriate goal for L2 learners in Southeast Asia who will most often use English with other L2 users.

## Limitations of the study

The first limitation of this study is that the data were collected from tertiary institutions only. Research conducted in other educational contexts such as high schools or private language institutions may increase the findings' generalisability. A second limitation points to considerable gender imbalance in the sample group. Of the 50 respondents, only 12 (24%) were male. However, the divergence of the male data from the global data is minimal. The average mean rating for males across the seven items was 2.26, which is only 0.07 lower than the global average of 2.33. The average standard deviation for male ratings was 1.21, which is only 0.15 lower than the global average of 1.36. Although further investigation into gender comparability is warranted, our rudimentary analysis predicts only a minor difference.

## Conclusion

This study investigated the relative value ascribed by Vietnamese EFL students to native- and non-native speakerness compared with other professional, personal, pedagogical, cultural and linguistic qualities that are the hallmark of a competent language teacher. Overall, the sample group ascribed greater value to these qualities than to native-speakerness. Respondents valued qualified and experienced teachers, enthusiasm coupled with the ability to teach interesting and informative classes, and familiarity with the local culture. The sole atypical item was non-native linguistic competence in English, as one section of the sample valued native-speaker teachers more highly due to their perceived role as ideal models of accurate pronunciation.

Findings from this study contribute to a growing number of studies that highlight the strengths of non-native teachers of English (Arva & Medgyes, 2000; Barratt & Kontra, 2000; Benke & Medgyes, 2005; Cheung & Braine, 2007; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005; Lee, 2000; Mahboob, 2004; Moussu, 2006), and illuminate the false premise of employing native-speaker teaching staff simply because "customers demand it" (Holliday, 2008). An understanding of the local culture and pedagogy, as well as first-hand experience of second language learning, carry more weight for Vietnamese learners of English.

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