The Young Learners' Preferences for Learning English with Native and Non-native Teachers

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Abstract

This study investigates the preferences of young learners regarding English language instruction provided by native and non-native teachers. Through interviews, the research aims to understand the key factors influencing these preferences. The findings reveal the subtle preferences that inform effective pedagogical practices, highlighting the importance of incorporating diverse teaching methodologies to enhance the learning experience and outcomes for students.

Keywords: young learners, native teachers, non-native teachers, language instruction, language acquisition, linguistic background.

1. Introduction

Language learning among young learners is an important aspect of English language teaching (ELT) and English as a foreign language (EFL), where native and non-native teachers play an important role in shaping language proficiency and language instruction. The debate surrounding the efficacy of native and non-native teachers in English language teaching emphasizes the need to understand the young learners' preferences. Despite the abundance of research on this topic, this study contributes to the field due to it has been realized from the perspectives of the young learners themselves.

Recognizing the individuality of each learner, educators must go deeper into the factors that shape individual needs and preferences to develop language instruction that truly works for young learners. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the preferences of young learners in learning English with native and non-native teachers. By understanding factors influencing these preferences, such as teacher language proficiency, linguistic background, and teaching approaches, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of effective language instruction for young learners.

2. Background

This study has been done according to the perspectives of young learners, as stated by Lee and Park (2021) children in the early stages of their educational journey, typically ranging from preschool to primary school age about their own preferences of learning English with native and non-native teacher.

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According to Smith (2018) native teachers are individuals who have acquired English as their first language and typically possess a native-like proficiency level. In the case of non-nativeness, Smith (2018) defines non-native teacher as individuals who have learned English as a second or foreign language and may not have the same level of proficiency or cultural background as native speakers.

The debate on native versus non-native English teachers has been discussed by different scholars and proponents who defend their own perspective. For instance, Smith (2018) suggests that native teachers may provide authentic language information, while non-native teachers offer a deeper understanding of linguistic challenges. In the context of this study, young learners as the participants presented their responses in which they showed their awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of learning English with native and non-native teachers. Nevertheless, the participants concluded that for them is beneficial to have a non-native teacher because they do not present the language barriers, that according to García and Wei (2014) language barriers are understood as the limitations or difficulties that arise when individuals or groups are not able to use their entire linguistic resources for communication due to factors such as language proficiency, cultural differences, or social contexts. In addition, García and Chen (2019) suggest that students from similar linguistic backgrounds may benefit from non-native teachers.

Although, the participants marked their preference for be instructed by non-natives teachers, they mentioned the advantages of having a native English, a native teacher can help to improve fluency, increase speech rhythm, some other authors such as Lee and Park (2021) agree with the idea of having native speaker as teachers due to the importance of exposure to diverse linguistic models.

Moreover, the participants mentioned that they prefer non-native teachers because their way of teaching English, or according to Richards and Rodgers (2014) teaching approaches can be defined as the methodologies and teaching strategies, that are implemented by teachers to instruct knowledge and learning in a classroom.

Something that the participants also mentioned was that their non-native teachers implement activities where they can play, sing, create art crafts, among other activities, this supports the idea of Johnson, Smith, and Brown (2020) where they emphasized the importance of teaching approaches in language instruction, irrespective of teacher background, the authors argue that communicative and student-centered approaches are more conducive to young learners' language development than traditional methods.

3. Method

The objective of this research is to investigate and analyze young learners' preferences for learning English with native and non-native English teachers, with the aim of identifying key factors that influence their teacher selection.

3.1 *Qualitative paradigm*

The present study follows a qualitative paradigm. This offers a depth exploration of the processes and motivations underlying young learners' English teacher preferences by studying this phenomenon in its real-world context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By choosing a qualitative paradigm, as a researcher I could comprehend the beliefs, reasons, emotions, and experiences among others that are shaping young students' views on native and non-native teachers from their own perspectives. The ultimate objective is to arrive at a complete explanation of pedagogical preferences that is supported and rooted in real world contexts.

This study also follows a case study methodology. According to Heale and Twycross (2017), case study is commonly use in social and humanities field. It can be defined as a study about a person or groups of people with the purpose of investigate specific phenomena, critical issues, behaviors, or events in depth. The reason of choosing this research methodology is based on the idea that case studies can provide qualitative data, allowing researchers to explore and understand a complex phenomenon.

3.2 *Context and participants*

This case study was developed in a private language institute. The group consisted of four females and three males, each with a unique educational   background. They range in age from six to ten years old. Despite their diverse school experiences, all participants are currently enrolled in an English language program with a non-specific purpose at the language institute.

Because the participants are underage, their parents received a consent letter (see appendix) with all the information about this research, and they were free to allow their daughter and son's participation. It is also relevant to mention that their names will be protected through all this the research. The data presented is what the participants answered in their interviews; however, their names are not mentioned due to each participant had been assigned a code to present their responses to protect their identity.

3.3 *Data collection instrument*

This case study used interviews as a data collection method. According to Dörnyei (2007) emphasizes the qualities of a "good" qualitative interview, highlighting the importance of natural progress and richness in detail. Considering this, I aimed for an interview process that would not only progress naturally but also provide comprehensive insights into the participants' preferences.

According to Gubrium and Holstein (2002) contrast structured and unstructured interviews, pointing out the flexibility and freedom that open-ended (unstructured) interviews offer to both interviewers and interviewees. However, given the characteristics of my context and participants, I opted for a structured approach. Working with young learners, I anticipated potential challenges such as low attention span, lack of vocabulary to answer the questions, as well as the lack of knowledge to complete the questionnaire. By employing structured questions, I could maintain control over the interview, ensuring a focused exploration of the topics and directly obtaining the information I needed.

3.4 *Data analysis*

Braun and Clark (2006) define thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data. Thematic analysis is a flexible and systematic approach that can be applied to various types of qualitative data, including interview transcripts, focus group discussions, and open-ended survey responses.

After implementing the structured interviews, I translated and transcript all the information. Then I gathered all the relevant data of every participant in a macro level chart and coded the data by the research technique, code of participant, unit of meaning, and interpretation, then I construct a micro level chart with the same categories, but this time with all the information of all my participants. Once I identified the patterns that frequently were pointed out by my participants, I organized them into themes.

Considering that thematic analysis is for analyzing data, I believe this is a method makes easier this process, because it is both structured and flexible. I consider that the real

advantage of using thematic analysis lies in its ability to capture the complexities of human experiences and perspectives in detail.

4. Results and discussion

In the following sections, the results of the study will be presented to answer the research question: What are the factors that influence students' preferences for learning with a native or non-native teacher? Five themes were identified: Language proficiency, linguistic background, language barriers, and systematic and gradual teaching approaches.

4.1 *Native teachers are proficient at teaching their language.*

One of the questions that were asked to the participants was "What kind of teacher (native or non-native teacher) do you think knows more about the language?"

> "Native teacher because has spoken English since he was a baby and has always learned it and he already knows more words." (R, Int. 1)

This participant recognized the advantages of learning from a native English speaker who has a lifetime of experience with the language, a continuous learning mindset, and a perceived extensive vocabulary. Moreover, there was a pattern between this participant and the others for example:

> "Being from the United States, they already have that language and know a little more."
>
> (P, Int. 2)
>
> "Native teachers teach their language more." (F, Int. 4)
>
> "Because he is from the United States, he knows more English." (L, Int. 5)
>
> "A native teacher knows more because she is from the United States, and I think in the United States they speak like English." (E, Int. 6)

According to Krashen (1985) emphasizes the importance of meaningful and comprehensible input in language learning, native speakers are often considered optimal sources of such input due to their natural fluency and use of the language.

The perspectives shared by these learners marked the perceived advantages of having a native teacher when learning a language, particularly English. They highlight the notion that native speakers possess a natural understanding and familiarity with the language that non-native speakers may lack. In addition, they acknowledge the natural advantage that individuals from English-speaking countries, like the United States, may have in terms of language proficiency. According to the participants answers, there is a strong belief and as it was mentioned before, that native speakers provide more authentic input, which is an important factor for developing language skills.

4.2 *Non-native teachers do not present language barriers with students who share a common linguistic background*

Another theme that had relevance in the findings and results of the previous data, was related to the non-existent language barrier between non-native teachers and students that have a common linguistic background. The participant mentioned this:

> "Because non-natives understand us better, as natives may not know some words in Spanish." (E, Int. 6)

This participant believes that non-native teachers, despite not being native speakers of the language that they are teaching, are capable of effectively communicating with their students and do not create obstacles or barriers related with language. The participants' responses were similar and followed a pattern where they affirmed that non-native teachers tend to understand them more. Here there are some of their responses:

"The non-native teacher understands what I'm saying." (E, Int. 3)

"Communicating with a non-native teacher is easier, because he doesn't speak 100% English and if he wants to tell us something that we don't understand, he could tell us in Spanish, and we will understand it." (R, Int. 1)

"I prefer non-native teachers because we speak the same language." (P, Int. 2)

"I prefer learning with a non-native teacher because you are not going to get stuck when you speak Spanish like a native teacher." (E, Int. 7)

While being a native teacher may provide an initial advantage, non-native teachers can also acquire a deep understanding and proficiency in a language through dedicated study and immersion.

According to Nunan (2003) the importance of understanding learners' backgrounds, needs, and motivations are key factors in language teaching. These factors should be considered by language teachers to implement an adequate curriculum in order that the language learning process can be effective for the learners.

Nunan (2003) also points out that the emphasis on learner-centered approaches and understanding learners' backgrounds aligns with the idea that shared linguistic backgrounds between teachers and students can facilitate communication and understanding in the language learning process.

The findings indicate that non-native teachers do not present language barriers for students who share a common linguistic background. The participants consistently reported that non-native teachers, despite not being native speakers of the language they are teaching, are capable of effectively communicating with their students. This is particularly evident when both teachers and students share the same first language, as it facilitates easier communication and understanding. The insights from the participants, such as their preference for non-native teachers due to shared language, support the notion that non-native teachers can bridge communication gaps more effectively in such contexts. This aligns with Nunan (2003) perspective that make an emphasis on the importance of understanding learners' backgrounds and the benefits of a learner-centered approach in language teaching. Therefore, non-native teachers with a common linguistic background as their students can offer significant advantages in language education by enhancing communication and understanding.

4.3 *Language barriers between native teachers and language students*

In contrast to the non-existent language barriers between non-native teachers and students that share a common linguistic background, the data obtained reveals an important pattern where the participants believe that native English teachers can present a language barrier with Spanish speaking students. These participants noted this:

"Because the others can't only understand my language. Okay. Because they speak that language and don't talk our language." (R, Int. 1)

"I prefer learning with a non-native teacher because they might explain more things to us, the meaning of things, and native teachers do not know a lot of words in our language" (L, Int. 5)

Although often is assumed that native teachers possess an inherent advantage in communication due to their linguistic background, language barriers can still arise due to factors such as differing dialects, teaching styles, and culture. Participants expressed that native teachers might struggle with certain aspects of communication and understanding specific to their linguistic and cultural context. For instance, native teachers may not be familiar with the nuances and slang of the students' first language, which can hinder effective teaching and learning.

Moreover, native teachers might use idiomatic expressions and complex sentence structures that are difficult for students to grasp. Without a common linguistic background, it can be challenging for native teachers to provide clear explanations or translations that resonate with students' existing knowledge and language skills.

Further, cultural differences can play a significant role in creating language barriers. Native teachers may not fully understand the cultural references or educational expectations of their students, leading to miscommunication and a lack of engagement in the classroom. For example, teaching styles that are common in the native teacher's country may not align with the students' learning preferences, making it harder for students to follow along and participate actively.

Additionally, the assumption that native speakers are inherently better teachers can overlook the importance of pedagogical training and empathy in language teaching. Non-native teachers who share a common linguistic background with their students often have the advantage of having learned the language as a second language themselves, which can make them more attuned to the difficulties and challenges their students face. This empathy can result in more effective teaching strategies that are tailored to the students' needs.

4.4 *Native teachers do not follow a systematic approach when teaching*

Another important aspect of the data obtained for this research, is related with approaches, the participants argue that native teacher, because it was born in an English dominant country, is expected to teach at a faster pace, possibly due to a perceived fluency or natural proficiency in the language.

"He's from the United States and he's going to teach us things faster." (P, Int. 2)

"Native teacher may teach us faster and some things may not be clear to us." (L, Int. 5)

"A native teacher may teach us faster than the other teacher." (E, Int. 6)

Despite these observations, there is no concrete evidence that native teachers do not follow a systematic approach. Instead, participants seem to have a preconceived notion that native teachers teach faster than non-native teachers. This perception could stem from the assumption that native speakers, being more fluent, might not need to adhere to a structured teaching methodology as rigorously as non-native teachers.

However, the faster pace of instruction can sometimes lead to confusion and gaps in understanding for students. Native teachers might unintentionally skip over foundational concepts or fail to explain language rules in detail, assuming that students can grasp these aspects intuitively. This can create challenges for students who may need more structured and step-by-step guidance to learn effectively.

Furthermore, the lack of a systematic approach might be perceived rather than actual. Native teachers might employ methods that are flexible and adaptive, which can be misinterpreted as a lack of structure. They may rely on immersion techniques, spontaneous conversation, and

real-life examples, which, while effective in many contexts, can seem haphazard to students used to more formal and systematic teaching styles.

In contrast, non-native teachers often rely on systematic and structured approaches due to their own experience of learning the language as a second language. They might use explicit grammar instruction, structured exercises, and incremental learning steps, which can provide clarity and build a solid foundation for language learners.

Participants' preference for non-native teachers' structured approach reflects a need for clarity and comprehensibility in language instruction. The systematic methods employed by non-native teachers can help in breaking down complex language concepts into manageable units, ensuring that students fully understand each aspect before moving on to the next.

4.5 *Non-native teacher follow a gradual approach*

As it was discussed, one participant of this research believe that native teachers teach faster, and consequently non-native teachers follow a gradual approach that helps them to acquire the language according to their learning needs. This participant pointed out this:

"Non-natives teachers go step by step in teaching others." (E, Int. 3)

This participant believes that non-native teachers, when teaching a language, are more likely to break down the learning process into small units of language. This could be seen as his experience learning with non-native teacher.

However, it is essential to recognize that teaching styles and methodologies can vary based on individual preferences, educational philosophies, and the context in which they are teaching. Some teachers may adopt more flexible approaches, while others may adhere strictly to a specific method or system. Ultimately, the effectiveness of teaching should be evaluated based on student learning outcomes rather than the nationality or teaching approach of the instructor.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of teaching should be evaluated based on student learning outcomes rather than the nationality or teaching approach of the instructor. While non-native teachers might generally employ a more gradual and structured approach, this does not inherently make them better or worse than native teachers. The success of any teaching strategy depends on how well it meets the learning needs of the students and how effectively it facilitates their language acquisition.

5. Conclusions

The primary objective of this study was to explore young learners' preferences for English instruction from both native and non-native teachers, while identifying influential factors in teacher selection. The analysis revealed that participants recognized the benefits of native teachers but also acknowledged drawbacks such as language barriers. Conversely, preferences leaned toward non-native instructors due to advantages in communication and shared linguistic background.

This study provides practical insights in the ELT field. By understanding the factors influencing these preferences, such as the perceived benefits and drawbacks of each type of teacher, language teachers can develop more effective language education programs and teacher training initiatives. Specifically, the analysis revealed that young learners prefer non-native English teachers due to advantages in communication and shared linguistic background. Curriculum designers can consider incorporating more opportunities for language exchange and cultural integration into language education curricula. They can also provide support and resources for non-native teachers to enhance their language proficiency and teaching skills.

For further investigation into the young learners' preferences for learning English, a comparative analysis between participants taught by native English teachers and those instructed by non-native English teachers is justified. This analysis aims to discern potential differences in perspectives, experiences, and preferences between the two groups, contributing to a deeper understanding of the factors influencing English teacher selection among young learners.

Despite limitations including a small participant group and data collection instrument constraints, this study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of language education. As a non-native English teacher myself, I believe this analysis offers an insightful understanding of the dynamics at play in language education. Through my own experiences in the classroom, I have observed the facilities of communication and cultural exchange that occur between non-native teachers and their students.

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