

Thai EFL University Students' Perceptions of Native English-Speaking Teacher and Teacher's Voice: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Cultural Perspectives

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Abstract: This study aims to explore Thai EFL university students' perceptions of their native English-speaking teacher (NEST). The data were collected by distributing students' questionnaires with one hundred and thirty- three (N=133) freshmen students, based on three specific areas which included general perceptions, students' language skills, and cultural perspectives. Moreover, qualitative data were collected by conducting semi-structured focus group interviews with nineteen freshmen students and also a one-on-one semi-structured interview with their NEST. Results showed that most students showed positive attitudes toward their NEST in terms of a relaxing learning environment, teaching performance, and cultural adaptation between them. Students preferred the NEST to teach them listening and speaking skills, whereas the weaknesses were concerned with teaching grammar, examination strategies, and the ability to communicate in Thai. Regarding students' voices, they expressed their warm-hearted feeling by using a metaphor as truly high complimentary for their NEST. Cultural perspectives were also discussed. Overall, these findings suggested that being taught by NEST can be useful for Thai EFL students and it would be helpful for administrators to take these results from students' voices into consideration whenever they decide to hire NEST for the teaching position. Suggestions for further studies were also discussed.

Keywords: Native English -Speaking teachers, Students' Perceptions, English Language Teaching, English as a Foreign Language

1. Introduction

Regarding Kachru (1992) who influentially proposed three concentric circles of English, Thailand has been categorized into the expanding circle as shown in figure one which means that English has been taught as a foreign language. Currently, it is undeniable that English is widely spoken around the world. People from around the world used English to communicate between different social groups and obtain global information. As a result, it would be widely believed that native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) were qualified teachers in non-English speaking countries regarding their fluency and accuracy in their mother tongue. In terms of students' preferences, Watson & Pojanapunya (2009) posited that they preferred being taught by NESTs especially in pronunciation areas.

There are many job vacancies for NESTs in Thailand. These job advertisement websites are strongly believed to have only NESTs from the inner circle to teach English as can be seen in some job vacancies of the positions as follows:

Join the fastest-growing language school in Bangkok! Modulo Language School is seeking a full-time native English-speaking teacher who is available to teach evenings and weekends.(ajarn.com, 2023)

Oisca International School is seeking Native English Speaking Teachers for Kindergarten who teaches student ages range from 1.5 years to 7 years. They must have teaching experience, preferably young children...(jobsdb.com, 2023)

It is recognized that academic institutions in Thailand prefer to seek native speakers of English who are believed to be ideal language teachers to teach and help students improve their English proficiency as Phillipson (1992) proposed the term “native speaker fallacy”. In the Thai EFL context, the job opportunities have still been openly recruited for the NESTs around the world. More importantly, the hardest issues were raised in how it can be assured who the best or the most suitable NESTs to be teaching in the Thai EFL context, specifically, cultural perspectives also critically played an essential role in English language teaching and the effects on the relationship between teachers and students especially, when they came from different societies according to Hofstede’s (1986) cultural dimension.

The emergence of the controversial issues relating to NESTs and NNESTs has remained in heated discussion for several decades (Lagabaster & Sierra, 2002; Torres,2004; Sung, 2010; Chun, 2014, Rahman & Yuzar, 2020). However, there is no absolute answer to the heated question “Who is the best teacher between NESTs and NNESTs?” For this reason, several scholars (Wu & Ke’s,2009; Alseweed, 2012; Arvizu, 2014; Wang & Fang, 2020) from many countries around the world made their attempt to investigate the differences in teaching styles, teaching behaviors, as well as students’ perceptions of both NESTs and NNESTs for the purpose of maximizing students’ learning outcome as much as possible. Importantly, students’ perceptions and teachers’ voices play a significant role to trigger the researcher’s idea for improving teaching and students’ learning ability. Sharing personal experiences about English language teaching in the classroom is considerably important for both NEST and students to create better understanding between them. In addition, it is beneficial to seek out how to adjust teaching methods and students’ learning style. Consequently, this study aims to explore the students’ perceptions towards their NEST focusing on strengths, weaknesses, and cultural perspectives through the lens of both teacher and students’ voices. The study addresses three research questions as follows: (1) What are Thai EFL undergraduate students’ perceptions toward a native English- speaking teacher?; (2) To what extent do the students confront language learning difficulties in class? If any, how can they overcome those difficulties?, and (3) Do cultural differences between NEST and their students affect their learning in some ways? If so, how can NEST cope with those problems?

2. Literature Review

Regarding the studies relating to NESTs and NNESTs, several scholars made their attempt to conduct their research in this related field (Alseweed, 2012, Arvizu, 2014; Rahman & Yuzar, 2020; Wang & Fang, 2020) and it has been widely investigated and discussed for more than two decades as shown in the earlier research(Tang ,1997; Samimy & Brutt-Griffler,1999; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002; Sung, 2010; Arvizu, 2014, Rahman & Yuzar, 2020) . Students’ perceptions of both types of teachers have interestingly been explored as shown in several studies. The current evidence that appeared to be proved that research studies on the related issues were still in the spotlight. For instance, it has been recently found in Rahman & Yuzar (2020) study that NESTs could possibly create better lively classroom activities, whereas, NNESTs could possibly understand more on local students’ need due to their similar cultural background.

The significant evidence in the Taiwanese context demonstrated in Wu & Ke’s (2009) study as they found that the NESTs were expected to be better at interacting with students and more encouraged. More relaxed activities and fewer assignments and tests were also expected from the students. Some students expected a standard accent from NESTs. NESTs also showed their dissatisfaction with the students’ passiveness and lack of responsiveness. Students’ unwillingness to participate in the classroom was also found.

Concerning cultural differences, it is worth mentioning the definition of “culture” by referring to Hofstede’s (2011) definition which can be defined as “Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others”. Simply put, both students and teachers come from different cultures, and their cultural differences may cause them some learning difficulties in some aspects as Hofstede (1986) asserted that “Teacher and student are an archetypal role pair in virtually any society”. In the Korean context, Yoo (2014) explored how Hofstede’s cultural dimensions affect the teacher-student relationship and she found that teachers need to adjust their teaching methods to suit students’ needs to create positive interactions between them and maximize learners’ outcomes through the communicative approach and reflective teaching.

In Thai EFL context, the benefits of being taught by NESTs are also found in Watson & Pojanapunya (2009), who highlighted that teaching pronunciation can be identified as the major strength of NESTs whereas learning strategies were found to be the strengths of NNESTs. Furthermore, the significant results from several researchers also concurred with the findings of the aforementioned research. For example, Alseweed (2012) conducted his research by utilizing a mixed- method paradigm with 169 Saudi male novice university students and found that their students preferred NESTs in terms of teaching strategies as it concurred with the other two research results of Samimy & Brutt-Griffler (1999) and Liu & Zhang (2007). However, there is some significant evidence from the previous studies (e.g. Sung, 2010; Arvizu, 2014) which showed that both NESTs and NNESTs can be embraced by the students as they justified their teachers concerning their specific areas of professional teaching. Furthermore, a qualitative study was conducted by Tsou & Chen (2019) to examine students’ perceptions toward NESTs and NNESTs. They asserted that the respondents preferred NESTs over NNESTs and they were both different in English instruction. Moreover, NESTs were found to be weaker in terms of communication, while the respondents perceived NNESTs’ English proficiency were limited. It is worth noticing that this idea is also consistent with the issue concerning the differences between NESTs and NNESTs which was proposed by Medgyes (1994). He posited that both NESTs and NNESTs “differ in terms of language proficiency, teaching practice (behavior), and that both of them could be equally good teachers in their own terms” (1994). However, it has been recently found some significant evidence from the work of Wang and Fang (2020). They conducted their research in a Chinese context by employing questionnaires and interviews and found that there was no strong preference for NEST and the disparity between NEST and NNEST did not probably depend on their linguistic identity.

The pros and cons of having both NESTs and NNESTs as English teachers have been continuously discussed up until now. Considering the importance and necessity of English language teaching and learning in Thailand, it seems that the research which aims at investigating Thai EFL university students’ perceptions towards their NESTs is essential to support and build upon the knowledge from the previous studies. Additionally, it is worth conducting research on this issue in order to create a better understanding of the dichotomy of NESTs through the lens of Thai EFL learners. Consequently, the findings can be used as references to seek out how to bridge the gap between Thai undergraduate students and their native English-speaking teacher to maximize students’ learning outcomes. More beneficially, it can be considerably useful for the administrative team in the academic institution to consider recruiting NESTs into teaching positions at the undergraduate level.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

An explanatory sequential mixed- methods research design was employed in this study (Creswell, 2014). In the first stage, the questionnaires were distributed to all participants. The obtained data were collected, calculated, and analyzed by using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program version 16.0 when receiving all responses from the participants.

Moreover, qualitative data was collected by employing semi- structured focus group interviews with four groups of volunteering students. Moreover, one-on-one semi-structured interviews with a NEST were also conducted. The semi- structured focus group interviews with students were administered in Thai to avoid misunderstanding the main concept during the interview. The interview protocols were provided as a guide to the interview process. The researcher asked for their permission

to record their interviews and informed them that their names would be kept confidential and used pseudonyms instead. After that, the interview data were transcribed and analyzed by thematic analysis (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Results were returned to participants to check for accuracy of the data. Member checking was also another technique which was used to ensure the accuracy of data to ensure the credibility of the results.

3.2 Participants

The participants of the study were 133 Thai EFL undergraduate students who had the experience of being taught by native English-speaking teachers. Purposive sampling was employed in this study as this research was mainly conducted with the participants who studied English foundation with NEST. They were all freshmen from a state university in Bangkok and they were mixed ability students who came from three different faculties and were required to enroll in the subject of Foundation English as compulsory courses. 19 volunteering students participated in the focus group interviews. The participants were informed that their data were kept confidential. There were twenty-one English teachers but we had only one NEST from England. NEST originally comes from the U.K. He has been living in Thailand for more than 10 years since 2006. He received the Cambridge Trinity TESOL certificate, which was taken from a five-week course in the UK. He is an experienced teacher who used to teach Vietnamese and Laotian students before.

3.3 Instruments

The questionnaire was adapted from the study of Alseweed (2012) and Chun(2014) and the researcher developed and made them compatible with teaching and learning situations in the classroom. To avoid misinterpretation, the questionnaires were translated into Thai and three experts who specialized in language teaching were asked to check the meaning in Thai including backward translation. In addition, they all were asked to rate the relevance of all items to their categories by utilizing IOC (Index of item-objective congruence). The items passed the criteria with a value of 1.00 which was considered acceptable. In terms of reliability, the questionnaire items were calculated by Cronbach's alpha coefficient and found that the reliability value was .89 which implied that the questionnaire is reliable. The quantitative data was collected by administering 38- five-point Likert scale items of statements to 133 Thai EFL undergraduate students who had the experience of being taught by native English-speaking teachers. Regarding ethical issues, NEST was asked for permission to distribute the questionnaire to his students and the students were asked to sign the consent form to ensure that their identity would be kept confidential.

4. Results

This present section attempted to answer three research questions which employed an explanatory sequential mixed- methods research design. Therefore, the results of this study were categorized into two sections which were quantitative, followed by qualitative findings.

4.1 Quantitative Findings

After collecting all responses from participants, the data were gathered, calculated, and analysed by employing Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program.

In order to answer research question number one: "What are Thai EFL undergraduate students' perceptions toward a native English-speaking teacher?", the results were categorized into three groups which were students' perceptions of NEST, learning and teaching English language skills, teaching culture and cultural differences perspectives as can be seen in table 1,2, and 3 respectively.

Table 1. Section one: Students' perceptions of NEST

Items	Statement	M	SD.
1	English should only be taught by native English lecturer.	4.05	0.80
2	I feel more comfortable in class with a native English lecturer.	4.29	0.77
3	I feel anxious and uncomfortable when I study with a native English lecturer.	2.40	1.20
4	A native English lecturer is aware of students' language needs.	4.21	0.74
5	A native English lecturer is thoroughly prepared for class.	4.71	0.52
6	A native English lecturer is friendly because he provides a relaxed learning environment.	4.68	0.51
7	Having a native English lecturer helps reduce my fear of talking to native speakers outside the classroom.	4.06	0.98
8	A native English lecturer has difficulty understanding and answering students' questions.	2.28	1.10
9	I feel that I miscommunicated with my native English lecturer and had trouble understanding his accent.	2.66	1.11
10	A native English lecturer usually uses a variety of teaching methods.	4.02	0.85
11	I get to practice a lot of English in a native English lecturer's class.	3.86	0.88
12	A native English lecturer would explain lessons to us clearly.	4.05	0.80
13	I understand my native English lecturer's pronunciation clearly.	3.92	0.87
14	A native English lecturer would use innovative teaching strategies to help students learn better.	3.96	0.76
15	I often feel frustrated because my native English lecturer does not speak any Thai.	2.50	1.22
16	I have positive attitudes toward the learning of English with a native English lecturer.	4.43	0.70
17	It is beneficial for low-proficiency students to study English with a native English lecturer.	4.20	0.90
18	I feel that my English proficiency level is not compatible with teaching by a native English lecturer.	2.68	1.18
19	If I could choose a teacher myself, I would choose a course taught by a native English lecturer.	4.24	0.88
20	I feel confident that I have a good relationship with my native English lecturer.	3.98	0.90
21	On the whole, I was happy when I studied with a native English lecturer.	4.39	0.74

Table 1 demonstrated that the vast majority of the participants thought that their NEST was thoroughly prepared for class as shown in item 5 (mean=4.71, SD=0.52). Moreover, the participants perceived that their NEST was friendly and provided a relaxed learning environment as shown in item 6 (mean=4.68, SD = 0.51), followed by the participants who had a positive attitude toward the learning of English with their NEST (mean=4.43, SD= 0.70). Whereas, the least number of participants showed their disagreement with item 8 (mean = 2.28, SD = 1.10). It can be assumed that the communication between them might not be the major problem that could create some misunderstanding in the classroom. Moreover, teachers' personality might play a pivotal role to create a better learning environment and motivate students to learn English as he was friendly and thoroughly prepared for class.

Table 2. Section 2: Learning and teaching English language skills

Items	Statement	M	SD.
22	Listening and speaking skills should be taught by native English lecturers.	4.42	0.76
23	A native English lecturer could give good feedback for me to improve my listening and speaking skills.	4.20	0.74
24	Reading skills should be taught by native English speakers.	4.22	0.81
25	A native English lecturer could give good feedback for me to improve my reading skills.	4.20	0.78
26	Writing skills should be taught by native English speakers.	3.91	0.86
27	A native English lecturer could give good feedback for me to improve my writing skills.	4.03	0.84
28	Grammar should be taught by a native English lecturer.	3.69	1.02
29	A native English lecturer could give good feedback for me to improve my grammar.	3.79	0.96
30	Vocabulary should be taught by a native English lecturer.	4.20	0.86
31	A native English lecturer could give good feedback for me to improve my vocabulary skills.	4.12	0.81

Concerning learning and teaching English language skills, the results in table 2 showed that the vast majority of the participants thought that listening and speaking skills should be taught by NEST (mean = 4.42, SD = 0.76), while the least number of the participants believed that grammar should be taught by NEST (mean = 3.69, SD = 1.02). As a result, it could be attributed that real authentic accent from NEST was considerably important for students to learn, especially, listening and speaking skills. Besides, some students might need more explanation about grammar rules. When NEST explains grammar rules in English to some weaker students, it could be complicated for them to understand clearly.

Table 3. Section 3: Teaching culture and cultural differences perspectives

Items	Statement	M	SD.
32	I think that the target culture should be taught by a native English lecturer.	4.29	0.74
33	I would learn more about the culture of the English-speaking people with a native English lecturer.	4.04	0.83
34	I feel confident that I have a good relationship with my native English lecturer.	4.23	0.74
35	A native English lecturer is competent because he is aware of the students' culture.	4.39	0.68
36	I would prefer a native English lecturer to teach me the culture of English-speaking people.	4.35	0.64
37	A native English lecturer would understand Thai culture and adjust himself to Thai culture easily.	4.16	0.79
38	I am aware of cultural differences between a native English lecturer and me.	2.80	1.26

According to cultural perspectives, as can be seen from table 3, it demonstrated that the majority of participants (mean = 4.39, SD = 0.68) perceived that a native English lecturer was competent because he was aware of the students' culture as shown in item 35. Followed by item 36, the results showed that

the participants (mean = 4.35, SD = 0.64) preferred a native English lecturer to teach them the culture of the English-speaking people. However, some participants (mean = 2.80, SD = 1.26) showed their disagreement with item 38, which stated that they were aware of cultural differences between the native English lecturer and themselves. This could be implied that although their teacher is NEST, it did not make students feel any differences between them in terms of cultural diversity so students were not aware of this issue that much. It could be another reason that NEST could be well-adapted to teaching English to Thai students because of a long period of time that he spent in Thailand.

4.2 Results from Semi-Structured Focus Group Interviews

After having recorded, transcribed, and analyzed the data from the interview process, this section showed the emergence of evidence from participants which reflected on how they perceived in regard to the strengths and weaknesses of being taught by NEST.

4.2.1 The Strengths of being taught by NEST as an English Teacher: Teacher Characteristics

Results from focus group interviews with students were consistent with the results from the questionnaires regarding the strengths of having their NEST as an English teacher. The idea is supported by the obtained data from one of the students who expressed emotional opinion towards NEST's characteristics by using the metaphor as stated in the following excerpt.

The teacher is very kind and warm-hearted. The way he teaches us looks like a father treats his kids which make us happy. He treats us equally, takes good care of us, and tries hard to explain what I don't understand by speaking slowly. The teacher is empathetic, supportive, and helpful. (Student 1)

I like my teacher because he is flexible, well-prepared, and creates a relaxed learning environment. I also love the way he teaches us because he doesn't put much pressure on us. (Student 2)

4.2.2 The weaknesses of being taught by NEST: Teaching grammar rules

To the weaknesses of being taught by NEST, the ability to explain the lesson in Thai (L1) was one of the factors that influenced their learning English in the classroom as described in the following excerpt.

Grammar should be taught by a Thai teacher. Sometimes I don't understand NEST clearly when he teaches us grammar rules and I'm too shy to ask him a question. (Student 3)

I think it would be useful if NEST can learn to speak Thai and he can explain grammar rules in Thai. (Student 4)

NEST teaches us by focusing more on how to use English to communicate in daily life than exam-oriented. But sometimes, I need a Thai teacher to explain grammar rules. (Student 5)

4.3 Results from a one-on-one with a teacher (NEST)

However, on the other side of the same coin, it is also worth listening to the teacher's voice on these topics. This finding concurred with the result of the students' interview which showed his agreement with those students' opinions. Thematic analysis was employed to elicit the data in deep detail and analyze it concerning topic relevance.

4.3.1 Grammar rules explanation by using L1 (Thai)

Grammar rules explanation in Thai influences students' language learning as they requested their NEST to learn Thai so NEST can explain English grammar in Thai, whereas, NEST showed the disagreement on this issue by giving reasons as stated below.

I disagree that the NEST must speak Thai in class, but it would be useful. Most of the class should be in English. We have to encourage them to speak English. I agree that high-proficiency students should study with NEST but it is not always possible due to administrative reasons. (Student 6)

I accept that teaching in the Thai EFL classroom would be easier if I could speak Thai fluently and I would probably use more Thai if I could. Learning to speak any language is a big investment of both time and money, and I'm not sure the returns on learning Thai would be worth it since the teacher's salary is not that high. (Student 7)

4.3.2 Teaching methodology to overcome students' learning difficulties

This section provided the answer for research question number two: "To what extent do the students confront language learning difficulties in class? If any, how can they overcome those difficulties?". From NEST's opinion, he also demonstrated some techniques that he employed to cope with the problems while teaching in the classroom. Moreover, he suggested his teaching strategies as can be seen in the following excerpt.

I found that some students have problems understanding what I say. So what I do to overcome this problem is to use body language, miming, gestures, and pictures to help them.

I sometimes ask students who have some proficiency in English to explain to other students in Thai if they are struggling to understand. In other words, stronger students help the weaker ones.

I can understand basic Thai, so sometimes I overheard what they were saying about their problems in Thai but I helped them by explaining in English. So sometimes, it seemed like I can read their mind. I don't tend to speak Thai in class.

A lot of them have reasonable reading skills and levels of vocabulary, but their listening skills are poor. Occasionally, I translate words in isolation. I often use videos from YouTube with comprehension questions to lead into the topic, create mind maps in groups to elicit known vocabulary on the topic, and then move on to the lesson where they can learn the new vocabulary. Large class sizes mean that role plays can work well.

From NEST's point of view, it can be concluded that when the students confront some learning difficulties, such as, some difficult words, or complicated grammar rules, in that sense, NEST recognized what happened in his class and he solved the problem by using nonverbal communication to help students learn and made the contexts more understandable. Accordingly, he also believed that "stronger students help weaker ones". This could be in tune with the work of Hoon et al,2017, which suggested that it is significantly important for giving opportunities and allowing students to communicate with their peers.

4.3.3 Cultural differences

In order to answer research question number three: "Do cultural differences between NEST and their students affect their learning in some ways? If so, how can NEST cope with those problems?", the results from the one-on-one semi-structured interview with NEST were transcribed and summarized.

Regarding the cultural perspectives, NEST also mentioned how students greet him and their behaviors outside the classroom as stated below.

Most students greet me by saying, “Hello” both inside and outside the class. The relationship between NEST and students is good. They usually call me “teacher” or “teacher ...(name)” and do not usually express shyness. I have met some students outside the class and found that they didn’t want to chat that much, maybe because they fear speaking English or maybe they feel they are being “krengjai” (=very considerate). Rarely, some students have called me “Farang” (foreigners), which I think is an impolite way to refer to the teacher.”. In this case, it can sharpen our understanding of the issue about cultural awareness in the eyes of a westerner. Consequently, Thai people should be careful when they address Westerners by calling them “Farang”.

Furthermore, another negative aspect of cultural perspectives toward Thai EFL students can be described more in detail by NEST as he remarked.

Thai people speak over each other and it is acceptable for Thai people to do this, but not so in Western culture. It feels like disrespect when they speak over me. When it happens, I just stop speaking and wait for them to be quiet. The students usually tell each other to be quiet after a while. I don’t want to shout at them because I want to keep my energy.

Regarding NEST’s points of view, he also described the characteristics of Thai students as stated below. Although it can be conceptualized that East Asian students tend to be passive learners (Roe & Perkins, 2020); however, he also asserted that he did not totally agree with Thai students’ passiveness and it possibly related to their background knowledge and personal experience.

Generally, they are polite. Thai students are not lazy but they are not keen to do extra work of their own accord. They are motivated by external factors such as grades more than learning outcomes or learning goals. I don’t think Thai students are shy but they fear making mistakes. Thais are outgoing people. I partly agree with their passiveness. The contribution a lot of these students make depends on their past experiences in high school because schools have different methods of teaching. If the school they have come from has used the communicative approach, then they tend to be less passive whereas those who have come from a school where learning is more teacher-centered are more passive. I use a more communicative approach. If they have less experience with that, they find it hard and they appear passive because of their past experience.

According to the interview data related to teaching culture, it can be interpreted that NEST is aware of cultural differences as he has lived in Thailand for more than 10 years. He can adjust himself to Thai culture and he also gives useful suggestions and describes how to find out a combination when “East meets West” in his terms which are considered useful for students to understand as remarked,

Regarding Western culture, as it appears in the textbooks, I teach them based on facts because ‘culture’ is a sensitive topic in Thailand. I don’t encourage opinions on culture and differences between Thai and Western culture; I concentrate on the facts. I don’t teach culture specifically; I think the cultural difference is the key factor that stops the students from learning English. In the commercial textbooks, I have found that some material is not relevant to Thai students; for example, the material on public transport and directions is sometimes not suitable for Thai students because it is based on an unfamiliar place outside Thailand. The students might not have any experience of such a place and consequently, little interest in it. I discard those irrelevant items from the textbook and I tend to use my materials, such as maps from Bangkok public transport or my materials on Thai food, when food is the given textbook topic. I try to use a material that will encourage the students to talk and I try to personalize it as much as possible.

According to the interviews, these research findings indicated that cultural differences between NEST and students partly affected their learning in some ways which are relevant to the dissimilar characters of both parties. To create a better learning environment, NEST has sometimes adjusted himself to Thai students and put his effort into teaching culture to students appropriately and effectively. Although the students perceived that their NEST is flexible and creates a relaxed learning environment, they were expected to be more self-disciplined and well-behaved when they have to confront different cross-cultural situations that they have to learn from each other.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to investigate Thai EFL undergraduate students' perceptions toward native English-speaking teachers in terms of their strengths, weaknesses, and also cultural perspectives. Based on the findings from both the questionnaire and interview, it is indicated that even low-proficiency students have positive attitudes towards their NEST and they made their attempt to adjust themselves to their NEST. As evidence shown from the research findings in table 1, the strengths of having taught by NEST are NEST can create a relaxed learning environment including thoroughly prepared for the class which is consistent with the evidence that appeared in previous studies (Alseweed, 2012; Wu, 2009). On the contrary, from the students' viewpoints in this study, NEST is well-prepared in every class and NEST stated that he felt guilty if he did not prepare the lesson in advance for his class whereas Korean students in Chun's (2014) work indicated NESTs were too casual and seemed not to prepare well in their class. In addition, it can be interpreted that NEST will not only take advantage of his "nativeness" but he is also concerned about how well he gets his job done effectively as an English teacher. As a result, it leads to maximizing the students' learning outcomes. However, it would be possible that NEST might have different personalities, beliefs, and teaching styles on language teaching.

In terms of students' proficiency level, Jain et al. (2012) explored students' attitudes towards language learning, they found that low proficiency students had a better attitude towards the English language than high proficiency students. Regarding the appropriateness of being taught by NEST in the current study, students were more likely to appreciate NEST to be their English teacher, despite their low language proficiency level. This notion might not be in tune with the previous studies (Chun, 2014; Torres, 2004; Lagabaster & Sierra, 2002) which found that students were likely to prefer NESTs when they move to a more advanced- level of study. Particularly, Chun (2014) found that NESTs are better for advanced level students, and beginning-level students should be taught by NNESTs. Moreover, it may lead to the fact that the students did not view NESTs as empathetic, approachable, and understanding. In contrast, the students in this study perceived that their NEST showed empathy and sensitivity to students' learning difficulties. It could be linked to the teacher's understanding of the cultural background of Thai students due to living in Thailand for a long period. This is related to Hofstede's (1986) statement "The burden of adaptation in cross-culture learning situations should be primarily on the teachers." Although NEST cannot fully share the students' L1, the students described their warm-hearted feeling by using the metaphor "teacher like a father" which can be counted as truly high complimentary for their NEST. This might bridge the gap between NEST and students in terms of cultural differences.

Another perceived strength of NEST lies in their teaching skill, especially listening, speaking, and pronunciation. Based on the results of this finding, revealed that the students expressed that they preferred NEST in the area of listening, speaking, and pronunciation skills through a wider variety of teaching methods which is considered consistent with the study of Alseweed (2012), whereas they showed a preference for NNEST in the area of grammar explanation.

Regarding the weaknesses of the NEST as perceived by the students include teaching grammatical rules in English and NEST's ability to speak Thai, this finding concurred with the previous study by Chun (2014). Because of the students' proficiency level, some students might not feel comfortable communicating in English and it would lead to miscommunication and unwillingness to participate in every in-class activity. Therefore, students wished their NEST could speak Thai and they also believed that it could be helpful for them to cope with language difficulties. In Thai society, the teachers are most likely to focus more on exam-oriented subjects, whereas NEST focuses more on

communication skills. It can be imagined that if NEST can speak Thai, both NEST and students will share students' L1 knowledge. Therefore, grammar explanations would be easier for NEST to explain clearly to students.

As such, students recognized that they preferred Thai teachers to explain grammar rules to them to create a clearer and better understanding of English grammar rules. These results are similar to the previous studies (Sung, 2010; Chun, 2014) which indicated that grammar explanation should be carried out by NNEST. Regarding NEST viewpoints, he also agreed with those students' comments as suggesting that grammatical structure should be taught by Thai teachers and it can be counted to the benefit of the students. Nevertheless, he showed his disagreement on the issue that NEST should learn to speak Thai in the classroom because he asserted that students should try to practice speaking English with NEST as much as possible. Another reason was that it might not be worth a try due to the financial constraints. When NEST found that students were confronted with language learning difficulties, he applied various teaching methods, such as miming, body language, or even "stronger helps weaker" to help students learn better. From his own experience in teaching the English language in Thailand, he also makes a great effort to improve students' English proficiency in many aspects especially as he recognized that the grammar part is one of the important components in the students' examinations.

In terms of cultural perspectives, unsurprisingly, the results from quantitative and qualitative data demonstrated that students preferred NEST to teach them the culture of the English-speaking people, and the target culture should be taught by NEST. Both parties come from different cultures and societies so the gap between them should be bridged. It is worth noticing that students showed their respect to their NEST by "Wai" (put your hand together and bow slightly) and addressing their NEST as "Teacher...(name)" which is considered consistent with one of the four dimensions of the conceptual framework proposed by Hofstede (1986). It could be interpreted that Thai students come from large power distance societies so they tend to respect teachers both inside and outside the classroom. Furthermore, considering the feminine societies, Thai students were expected to try to behave modestly and they admired the friendliness of a teacher. On the other hand, NEST came from small power distance societies and NEST is more likely to employ a student-centered approach as was described in the qualitative data from both students and NEST interviews. Regarding both teachers' and students' recommendations, they believed that team teaching between NEST and NNEST should be implemented at the university level in order to solve the problem when students confront language learning difficulties, especially grammar explanation as it is considered that it is a must for their examination. As a result, team teaching might be considered a good choice and it is worth a try to solve the problem and bridge the gap between NEST and NNEST and students as suggested in several studies (Wu & Ke, 2009; Sung, 2014, Alseweed, 2012). To support this notion, Mahboob (2004) also pointed out that "Both NESTs and NNESTs working collaboratively can provide a better learning environment to ESL students." Concerning the aforementioned reasons, the teacher's personality, beliefs, and cultural experiences are considered to be salient factors that can influence students' learning behaviors, attitudes, and learning outcomes.

To summarize, it is hoped that these research findings would be helpful for administrators, stakeholders, and scholars to take these results from both NEST and students' voices on both strengths and weaknesses into consideration when they decide to hire NEST into the position in the future. Also, the results can be considered as insightful guidelines for NEST who decides to teach English in Thailand.

Future researchers should bear in mind that this research focused on a small sample size which was drawn from students from three different faculties in a state university in Thailand. All participants with the same characteristic studied Foundation English with only one NEST from England. It would be more beneficial to further study if more research instruments will be employed, such as participant observation in the classroom as it can be used to triangulate the data and obtain richer and much deeper information. From the findings, it is worth noting that team-teaching strategies and NEST training were suggested by the students to maximize students' learning outcomes.

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